

The London School of Economics and Political Science



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Interpretation

From audiences to users

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Media and Communications of the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, May 2011

Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

In this thesis I primarily address those within media and communications studies who research mass media audiences and their engagement with a diverse range of texts. I ask in what ways our knowledge about the interpretation of genres, emergent from many decades of empirical research with mass media audiences, is useful in understanding engagement with new media. This conceptual task is pursued empirically by applying a conceptual repertoire derived from reception analysis to interviews with youthful users of the online genre of social networking sites (SNSs). The thesis presents findings on the heterogeneity of children's experiences in using SNSs following their perceptions of authorial presence, their notions of others using the text, their expertise with the interface and pushing textual boundaries. I explore four tasks involved in the act of interpretation – those being intertextual, critical, collaborative and problem-resolving. In analysis, I also reflect on a selection of the core conceptual tools that have been animated in this thesis, in research design as well as analysis and interpretation. It is concluded that inherited concepts - text and interpretation, continue to be useful in extension from the world of television audiences to the world of the internet. Second, inherited priorities from audience reception research which connect clearly to the conversation on media and digital literacies prove to be important by connecting resistance and the broader task of critique to the demands of being analytical, evaluative and critical users of new media. Third, the notion of interpretation as work is useful overall, to retain in research with new media use, for there is a range of tasks and responsibilities involved in making sense of new media.

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1. Interpretation: from audiences to users

In this thesis, I ask in what ways our knowledge about the interpretation of genres, emergent from many decades of empirical research with mass media audiences, is useful in understanding engagement with new media. Throughout this thesis I use interpretation as the sum total of active, engaged, creative, sometimes critical and resistant tasks performed in interfacing with the media, irrespective of the directionality of communication (i.e, one way, interactive, etc.). I use interpretation to indicate a set of tasks enmeshed within the relations of social histories and practices of audiences and users and shaped to a considerable extent by the provisions of the media itself. Throughout, I use the word 'interpretation' to connect audiences with users and to extend audience theory into the age of the internet, without positioning a gulf between audiences and users. What is of interest to me is how far the conceptual framework accumulated around the notion of interpretative activity is instructive and constructive in the context of multidirectional, user-generated, interactive media. I carry these concepts into a project with the users of interactive media, but the subjects of interrogation are the concepts themselves.

Audience reception research, for over almost half a century, has received contributions from a range of sometimes warring fields. The story of audiences has been told for quite some time, by many audience researchers (e.g. Ang, 1987; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Alasuutari, 1999; Livingstone, 2006; Barker, 2006; Morley, 2006), with much difference between versions. But largely, there has been consensus that audiences engage with the media in a contextually shaped manner where contexts provide symbolic resources and restraints, that audience engagement with the media is shaped to an extent by the media itself, that audiences interpret the media heterogenously (from the meaning authored into the text and between each other), that such divergence from the dominant textual

message shows interpretation to be critical and sometimes resistant and finally, audiences are transforming as the media is transforming. Those sitting in front of the television now also hold the latest iPhone. That much has been established.

I have used words such as interpretation, genre, text, conventions, resistance, critique, divergence. These words have histories – they come to us from a range of fields. Text and genre come to us from literary theory, resistance and critique emerged from cultural theory, and together with other concepts from other fields, they have sustained decades of research with media audiences. Is all this useful for researching the new media user as well? And so this thesis, titled *Interpretation: From audiences to users*, sets out to ask in what ways a set of concepts from audience reception analysis can be transferred from mass-mediated communicative conditions to interactive ones. This is the central question pursued in this thesis, where this conceptual task is taken up empirically by applying a conceptual repertoire derived from reception analysis to interviews with youthful users of an online genre. I used concepts from audience studies to design a project with 60 children from the ages of 11 to 18, who go online on Facebook – and I sought to make sense of their work online, with this repertoire. My findings are on the diversity in their experiences of this genre; my conclusions and my inference, however, are on the repertoire of concepts itself. I justify the selection of my empirical project later in this chapter, for that too has an interesting contemporary history of its own, which can be traced back to panics about children as a homogeneous mass exposed to the ill effects of televisual media to modern-day conversations about children as yet another homogeneous mass, exuberant and expert in their interface with the internet. I also note here, that by saying I apply ‘a conceptual repertoire from reception studies’, I do not indicate that there is any one definitive set of concepts in the audience reception repertoire, for indeed this is a field which has received both theoretical and empirical contributions from a range of different fields. I select the text-reader moment of mutuality between the media itself and those who

engage with it, and use a set of concepts derived from literary aesthetics largely to indicate the ‘set of concepts’ I speak about.

In what follows I try to bring together audiences and users using a family of concepts around the text-reader metaphor, which, like all families perhaps, presents an opportunity for me to look at multiple relationships, generations, agendas, lines of discord and also multiple possibilities of integration – only a few of which I am able to pursue here. This chapter introduces the problems and prospects of bringing the fields of audience reception analysis and research with new media use (framed appropriately by many, through ‘literacies’) in close contact with each other, integrating selected concerns in each field, using questions on the agenda of the one to inform and illuminate those on the agenda of the other. Audiences and users are sufficiently similar in that they are both concerned with people’s involvement and active engagement with the media, which in turn has wider societal implications, and they are sufficiently dissimilar in that they represent entirely different contexts of mediation – the former rooted in mass-mediated environments, and the latter in the interactive digital world.

To contribute towards this project of integrating their concerns, the chapters that follow take up the empirical task of studying divergent, youthful interpretations of an online genre. While this thesis works with young users’ interpretative work with social networking sites (SNSs), the concept of the television ‘audience’ forms the backbone of this project and indeed gives it its overarching theoretical umbrella. As will be evident in the empirical chapters of this thesis, the conceptual connotations linked with the interpretation of texts bring with it frequent moments of exciting incompatibility to what is essentially a project with ‘users’. Significantly for this thesis, the ‘audience’ that was never a homogeneous or unified construct is transforming as new texts and new technologies with new modes and affordances mediate a digital world, and hence perhaps, it is fitting to begin this thesis with transforming audiences.

Transforming audiences and the evolution of an agenda

The title for this section is inspired by the title of a recurrent conference on audiences in interactive environments, hosted by the University of Westminster in 2007, 2009 and 2011, and also by the name of a new European project funded by COST that studies the societal implications of transforming audiences, both of which are important signposts in the landscape that this thesis sees itself as contributing to. I began this project with a fascination with the ways in which people are engaged with the media – my interests then rooted in audience reception research with televisual media, that is, in readers of stable, archivable media texts. When I started my project I discovered that this body of empirical work with active, engaged, critical and sometimes resistant audiences had not only already captured the attention of an entire generation of researchers at least two decades ago (indicating that the demanding task of providing empirical evidence that people sitting in front of the television set were not passive, mindless spectators, had already been undertaken brilliantly), but newer, fresher challenges and critiques had by now accumulated (Livingstone, 1998), not all of which had easy answers. For instance, questions from political economists about how far audience activity could really be celebrated (e.g. Kellner, 1998), were these celebrations taking forward a theoretical agenda or merely gathering a host of empirical evidence (see Morris, 1988), how far were they mis/reading real, lived issues of power (e.g. Condit, 1989), starting when and how should the audience reception story be told (see the *Communication Review* special issue in 2006) or, important for this thesis, had one reached the end of audiences in an interactive, networked world, that is, was this a rich agenda that had now run its race (Livingstone, 2004)? In libraries therefore, entire aisles of ‘audience books’ on a diversity of genres had already amassed and the generation of scholars who had authored these texts had now started looking back on, critiquing, telling histories of this field and often disagreeing on the way (see Livingstone, 2006; Barker, 2006; Morley, 2006).

The first three texts I read on audience research inspired me to think of a project that would research the *interpretations of genres* – one which would look at the mutuality, movement, action and engagement in the text-reader relationship. My very first piece of reading on empirical audience research – *Making Sense of Television* (Livingstone, 1998a) – continues to inspire me as I write a thesis on users and SNSs, for it reminds me of the centrality of genre and the centrality of interpretation in any moment of mediated communication. The second piece, which I read shortly after, *The Export of Meaning* (Liebes and Katz, 1993), embedded the concept of references, associations and mutual aid in my mind, and the third, *Reading the Romance* (Radway, 1984), showed me how texts and readers worked in contexts. All these concepts from research done with one-way mass media return time and again throughout this thesis that works with users of the internet.

The medium in question in my mind was still television. All these books dealt with the act of audience interpretation for television or print. My second moment of inspiration came from the sudden realization that this was all now challenged in the face of more visibly ‘active’ use that physically alters textual form and shape in a world with very new genres. But use, like interpretation, is also perhaps ‘the whole array of sense making practices that are proper to a given medium in its situation’ (Hartley, 1996, p. 58). While I was interested in interpretation, the idea of taking this task into the empirical clutter of the World Wide Web was born as I stumbled across a journal article titled ‘The challenge of changing audiences: Or what is the audience researcher to do in the age of the internet?’ (Livingstone, 2004) This was the key intellectual trigger for this project that captured the audiences-and-users puzzle succinctly and contextualized it within a range of interdisciplinary debates. In asking eight questions around the media-user relationship, the paper linked the mass media audience with the new media user thus:

...how do people follow hypertext pathways? Does it add new dimensions of writing? Are new practices of reading emerging? Are these more hospitable to alternative views, more inclusive of difference? More generally, what are the emerging skills and practices

of new media users? How do people variously “read” the World Wide Web? What practices surround the use of the web, email, chat and so forth? What competencies or literacies are people thereby developing? (Livingstone, 2004, p. 80)

This all linked audiences and users with multiple lines of inquiry in social research and constructed an exciting moment for audience research that was different from the exciting moment of the 1980s. The challenge was no longer to prove that human beings were not passive objects in their engagement with the media, but to argue for the retention of a narrative in a different technological and social moment by asking and answering questions which would need to use the audience reception repertoire (texts, readers, genres, narratives, interpretation) in the interactive world.

The significance of heterogeneity in interpretation and use

The third moment of inspiration is one which gives shape to the empirical task undertaken in Chapter 6 of this thesis, where I explore how children interface differently with an online genre, that is, how their literacies/interpretative work cannot quite be lumped together. This derives from the ‘digital natives/digital generations’ argument of uniform youthful expertise with digital media that I came across when I started working with youthful users of new media – an area of research that is now ‘in’, with exciting, interdisciplinary empirical work being contributed from both qualitative and quantitative traditions in this field (e.g. Bawden, 1998; Dahlgren, 2000; Drotner, 2000; Dwyer et al, 2007; Facer et al, 2000; Anderson and Tracey, 2001; Anderson and Bushman, 2001; Buckingham, 2002; Castells, 2002; Livingstone, 2007, 2009; Larsson, 2003; McMillan and Morrison, 2006; Nikken and Jansz, 2006). As the focal point of interest in ‘access’ to new media seemed to be complemented if not replaced by an interest in the nature and quality of ‘use’, diversity and divergence, what had been of significance in audience reception studies seemed to be in some ways overlooked in the digital generations argument, and also there seemed to be little in the form of empirical analysis of new media forms as texts (although note Toms and Campbell, 1999; Brügger, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009 amongst others). While my

overarching interest was in the text-reader metaphor in the age of the internet, my interest in heterogeneity therefore seemed to introduce a comparative element into the text-reader relationship that explains why the empirical work presented in this thesis seeks differences and similarities in children's negotiations of these texts. After the unifying narrative of excitement around youthful expertise was being sobered by researchers focusing on the highly diverse nature of use, the equally variable quality of use and not least, critical questions around youthful abilities to evaluate content, the 'digital generation' as an umbrella grouping had started being suitably queried (see Buckingham, 2006a; McPherson, 2008), primarily because it had started leading to problematic generalizations across the category of 'youthful experts' or even what seems to be called technocratic generations (Das, forthcoming in 2011). While much research was speaking of heterogeneity in the larger population as such, (note the research on media literacy for adults or for children) 'youth', 'young people' and 'children' continued to inform research as blanket categories that were often exoticized, suggesting that youth share a monolithic identity (Ito et al, 2010). For this project on audiences and users, it seemed interesting to ask why some diverged at the text-reader moment, when others agreed, and how, essentially, the interactive text was 'realized' differently. In imagining the media-user relationship for mass media, concepts spanning the cognitive, the affective, the cultural, the social and so forth had all proven useful and it was indeed clear in the context of new media that users continued to have different expectations and experiences in their readings (now physically alterative of texts), and that their creative competencies and meaning making were, as always, shaped by their symbolic resources.

Hence, staying close to the text-reader moment, I wondered – surely experiences of a text would be different across a convenient but perhaps misleading grouping of 'children' or 'young people'? In negotiating SNSs, an online genre, surely there must be consensus and disagreement – in children's encounters with syntax, in their creative, collaborative and engaged interpretative work, in the texture of their talk on anticipating negative spaces in this online text, in the scripts (Hoover et al, 2004) their

accounts presented on being evaluative and critical users? These gave me overarching theoretical concerns and as I began researching children reading an online genre, their negotiations of syntax, their resistance and acceptance of norms, the creative and collaborative interpretative work and the critical literacies of 'digital natives' became increasingly important.

A genre of interest

If these unresolved confusions around the media-user relationship provided a set of theoretical triggers behind the project, the empirical trigger came with what is now a nearly decade-old phenomenon, and which for lack of a better word, I am going to call for the time being an 'online' genre. The past decade has seen a steep rise in not just the number of SNSs, but also the academic, policy-directed and industrial research that has developed around them. SNSs, briefly described are a kind of networking portals where people have 'profiles' which carry their photos, interests and activities. They can be set to varying degrees of privacy, depending on how minutely the user has read and understood the privacy policies of these sites. They are portals on which young people connect with friends, write on each other's 'walls' (a space to share messages), send 'friend requests' to new people, choose to accept or reject such requests from others, share photos of holidays and so on. SNSs have also come up with a whole set of its own terminologies – the 'wall' on which people write messages, the games and other applications like quizzes etc which people can play with each other or by themselves, the 'poke' which is an electronic poke, literally to draw someone's attention. Throughout this thesis, a number of these terms will recur, in connection to SNSs like Facebook mainly, but also occasionally other SNSs such as MySpace or Bebo. It is impossible to do a run-through of the whole body of research, but it shall suffice to say, perhaps, that research has most usually been media-centred or use-centred, the former including attempts from within library and information sciences, information systems studies and so on which have looked at networks, the systems, the interfaces and design, and the latter involving the use of these

by youth, and resultant concerns around identity, privacy, trust, display, performance and so on. The latter has involved questions of identities (boyd, 2006a; boyd and Heer, 2006; Hewitt and Forte, 2006; DiMicco and Millen, 2007; Clemens et al, 2008; Livingstone, 2008a; Magnuson and Dundes, 2008; Zhao et al, 2008), trust (boyd, 2003; Dwyer et al, 2007), risk (Weeks et al, 2002; Brown and Strasburger, 2007; Moreno et al, 2007; Rosenblum, 2007; Livingstone, 2008a; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008), privacy (boyd, 2006; Dwyer et al, 2007, Melber, 2007; Rosenblum, 2007; Livingstone, 2008a; Moreno et al, 2008), harm, offence and the potential for public participation amongst other things, with an increasing amount of attention being devoted now to the anticipation and prediction of what forms social networking might take in the semantic web (Finin et al, 2005). Undoubtedly, there are a wide range of network sites, and a recent UK government research report (CLG, 2008) identifies ‘genres’ within the genre: profile-based, content-based, white-label, multi-user, mobile, micro-blogging/presence updates, social search, local forums, thematic websites and perhaps many more. If one tries accessing all of these in languages whose scripts are unfamiliar, immediately one recognizes them as SNSs. We all know documentaries, soaps and films ‘look’ a particular way), from the ‘feel of the thing’ – soap operas from diverse languages being the most common example (see Liebes and Livingstone, 2005 for the ‘diversification’ of this genre). This is also something that has long been recognized in the field of library and information sciences as user-document interaction (perhaps reminiscent of text-reader interaction), leading scholars in the field to suggest genre to be an ‘interface’ metaphor (Toms and Campbell, 1999).

Yet, this obvious point is not banal; already, in a decade, many conventions of televisual structure, where genres have evolved as a set of particular conventions, ensuring certain parity in their articulations across linguistic and cultural diversity, are all clear in ‘new’ media. SNSs have almost invisibly managed to draw their users into a contract, where, if one does not know how to ‘tag’, ‘like’, ‘scrap’ or ‘poke’, one has failed to perform the contractual responsibility – that of playing by the norms. As Robert Allen said for soap operas (Allen, 1985), perhaps SNSs too have a governing set of structural

principles by which the reader (substitute ‘user’) is able to recognize any specific instance as a SNS. Indeed the empirical connect between literacies and social networks has started developing; it only has to be sought out from within textual analysis of SNSs (e.g. Papacharissi, 2009) and the multiple literacies associated with it (e.g. Perkel, 2008).

Conceptual challenges

Carrying a repertoire of print and broadcast media-derived concepts into the world of textual instability indicated above is a challenging task. It presents conceptual challenges that are often knotty. Many scholars seem interested in meaning-making in the context of interactive media and ambitious conceptual challenges have been laid out (although remaining to be empirically tested) that (i) the visual is likely to be more effective than the verbal (Snyder, 2001); (ii) though not a mere translation of the latter, from one mode into another (Kress, 2003); (iii) that hyper-texts offer new dimensions in writing (Burbules, 1998); (iv) and so indeed a ‘new communicative order’ is upon us (Street, 1998); (v) where a refreshed theory of meaning is necessary (Kress, 2003). This chapter began by saying that this thesis brings audiences and users together in a conceptual union, while working with a family of concepts that it imports from mass-mediated environments to illuminate its empirical research in interactive ones. As these foundational concepts such as reception, interpretation, text and genre become difficult to define, the text emerges to be complicated – its conventions, structure and legibilities are now shared and blurred between authors, readers, writers, users, even ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2008), as doubts still remain over users becoming ‘active participants’ (van Dijck, 2009). It is therefore clear that a key challenge is that new media necessitates new modes of reading beyond the traditional, linear and rule-governed conventions of print and audiovisual media (O’Neill and Hagen, 2010).

An optimistic recognition of these dis/continuities is on the minds of many today, so for instance, Langer and Ito point out (2010) that contemporary interactive media make it difficult to ignore that viewers and readers actively shape meanings, or that as new genres evolve new forms of literacy are clearly required (Buckingham 2005). These literacies must, in order to move beyond the component of being critical about other people's production, be inclusive of the concept of creation and hence be more 'demand-led' rather than provided from above (Hartley et al, 2007). However, something that could be said in passing, or more often assumed than studied, actually poses multiple theoretical questions. Livingstone (2004), for instance, is concerned that there are practical and methodological problems researching new media interpretation and use, although she remains hopeful of studying reception from an analysis of use, something I call interpretation that is physically transformative of texts. Bruns (2008) points out today that interpretation is no longer silent, and setting aside for a moment that audience interpretation was never quite silent (take the audiences of plays, or those in multiplexes, or even those watching a television show in their bedrooms), one must agree that interpretation was silent as far as feeding back into the text itself was concerned: the text, unlike today's Web 2.0¹ texts, was not changeable. So, despite audience interpretation now having become more 'interiorized', and immensely more private and not least, leaving the text changed with use, usefully, it seems that 'reception may be once again gleaned – at least to some extent- from an analysis of use' (Livingstone, 2004, p. 11).

Empirical challenges

Distinctive methodological and empirical challenges emerge when one tries to study interpretation from the footprints left in use. As audiences transform into users and as texts are less stable than ever before, conceptual questions sometimes revolve around societal transformations; sometimes attention is paid to

¹ The term Web 2.0 generally is taken to refer to a generation of interactive applications and platforms on the worldwide web where users generate, share and distribute content in a networked, heterarchical and usually participatory manner.

the semantic distinctions between audiences and users (e.g. Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006), and generally, there is a search for new theories of meaning (Kress, 2003). This is also a difficult question of method, thereby placing question marks on how one is to go about researching private practices of use or indeed make sense of texts which disappear or change as fast as they were created, perhaps explaining why many of the conceptual claims listed in the previous section are often claimed by individual scholars rather than tested. Some identify methodological resources in the history of audience research to enter the age of the internet (Press and Livingstone, 2006); some call for testable and verifiable propositions for audience research in general (e.g. Barker, 2006); some adopt unconventional methods for studying audience reception (see Wood, 2007); some turn to visual methods (see, for instance, Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006); while others stop to ponder the efficacy of these new non-verbal methods despite their evident promise (see Buckingham, 2009). And there are many practical problems to consider. Livingstone (2004), in writing about the challenge of changing audiences, locates the problem of method as also being one of unavoidable practicalities – use is often private, more difficult to research than television viewing, increasingly it is also mobile, and she says we can no longer store up stacks of internet texts as we could video files. Markham and Baym’s book on internet research methods (2008) which brings together people conversing on method raises new questions around ethics, trust, privacy, online versus offline, ‘real’ versus ‘virtual’, and there are many attempts within audience researchers to move beyond tried and tested methods of research (cf. Gauntlett, 2007).

A shared agenda

Inspiringly for this thesis, its research context provided much encouragement for asking these kinds of questions by the way of conferences, projects and similar activities. In the UK and wider European academy, research agendas, conference themes, graduate programmes and academic publications focused on this exciting moment of transition within audience reception studies in its move from mass

to interactive environments. As the Transforming Audiences conference prepares for a third round (2011), and as the COST Action IS0906 on Transforming Audiences and Transforming Societies begins its work (2010), I realize that the European academy is making an attempt to keep changing audiences high on individual and collaborative research agendas. Today, academic publications from audience researchers who made seminal contributions to the field's exciting mass media days in the 1980s and 1990s frequently foreground the question of change (see Livingstone, 2004; Buckingham, 2009). For three years now, the Transforming Audiences conference has grown to become Europe's major recurring international conference for audience/user studies, with its latest conference (being planned as this thesis is submitted) on the transforming 'audiences' of online and mobile media, everyday creativity and DIY culture. Audience courses in graduate programmes focus on change in the face of interactive media, reception across genres and platforms informs multi-country projects with audiences of film, for instance (see Barker and Mathijs, 2008), a new journal, *P@rticipations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* (see www.participations.org), places audiences at the centre of its priorities and media literacy scholars often hail from an expertise in audience research and therefore frame 'new' questions for new environments with an appropriate degree of historicity. Conference sessions are being proposed on new audiences outlining that 'media convergence challenges not only the conceptual canon of (popular) communication research, but poses profound methodological challenges' (ICA Pre-conference #3, 2010²) and multi-country projects want to pay 'equal attention to audience-focused issues (especially media interpretations and mediated experiences) and user-focused issues (both adoption and use of technologies)' (COST IS0906 project summary³, 2010). All of this is necessarily linked to the wider questions of societal change and transformation with media and user fragmentation (for diverse ways in which this is incorporated into research agendas, see Hermes, 2006; Thumim, 2006; Lundby, 2008).

² <http://www.ica2010.sg/attend.html> (As accessed on 28th March 2011)

³ See http://www.cost.esf.org/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS0906-Transforming-Audiences-Transforming-Societies-End-date-February-2014 for the COST project

Interpretative work – users

Audiences, therefore, are transforming, and newer challenges dot the agenda of audience reception studies. At a time when one is surrounded by technologies and texts whose terms are still unclear (Peters, 2009), one of the ways in which the mass-to-interactive shift maps onto research agendas is visible in the connection being made between audience reception and media literacies, the latter defined generally as people's abilities to evaluate and critique the media and increasingly of course to create with it. As the mass-to-interactive moment inspires scholars to revisit tried and tested insights, one can see that the two agendas, audiences and literacies, share the focus on contexts and consumption, from audience ethnographies to literacies as shared, social practices. Also, the changing nature of texts (now fragmented, hybrid, fluid) as well as interpretation (now creative, collaborative, networked, participatory) has been linking audiences (and interpretation) and users (and literacies) for many. These concepts – interpretation (at the interface of readers/writers and texts) and context (which provides resources and restraints and helps think through diversity and difference) – make audiences and literacies 'interface' concepts (Livingstone, 2008) that necessarily involve multiple relationships of mutuality (hence the term 'interface'). One such relationship is clearly the hermeneutic one, between texts and readers, which helps think through interpretation, and another is the mutuality between the individual and the social, which helps to think about consumption and the social situation of reception as well as literacies. A striking illustration of this link between audiences and literacies is evident in some research careers that map the mass-to-interactive shift, displaying a trajectory that started off with audience research and then moved on to research with use and literacies. See, for instance – Sonia Livingstone, in her move from soap opera reception studies (Livingstone, 1998) to new media use and literacies (Livingstone, 2008), where she carried audience reception into the literacies project (Livingstone, 2004, 2008), or David Buckingham, as he moved from television literacy and soap operas (Buckingham, 1993a; 1993) to media literacies (Buckingham, 2003), or Henry Jenkins, from studies of television fan cultures (Jenkins, 1992)

to convergence culture and participatory media (Jenkins, 2006), or Klaus Bruhn Jensen, from news reception (Jensen, 1988) to analysing the semiotics of interactive media (Jensen, 2005).

The connection through all this is an engagement with people's active, engaged, critical, creative and resistant work with the media and increasingly, literacies, especially in the context of media literacies, have been offered as a suitable framework within which to place this in the age of creative interpretation. Is the hyper-reader fundamentally different from the traditional reader (Calvi, 1999)? What is the difference between reading and searching, or browsing? Is reading becoming more (or less) social, collective or collaborative than in the past (Thomas, 2005)? And thus, as Henry Jenkins and his colleagues argue, is intelligence (and perhaps even interpretation) now collective (Jenkins, 2006)? As scholars make connections from audiences to literacies (Livingstone, 2008), are hyperlink pathways in digital genres to be understood via discussions from the earliest days of hypertext, even by juxtaposing for instance encyclopaedia pages and hyperlinks (Brügger, 2009)? One can anticipate, for instance, that new textual genres are to emerge (Kress, 2009), but how is one to know how these new genres necessitate new modes of interpretative engagement? In moving from users to literacies, there are arguments that one is too wedded to technology in these kinds of conversations and an increasing recognition that 'computer skills' – of pushing buttons and changing fonts – is not equal to the wider, more critical concept of literacy. The very idea of literacy must necessarily be linked to an idea of legibility, as Livingstone asserts (2009), getting back a focus on the design of the interface itself (the text), and one must remember that use/literacies (like audience reception) are not isolated practical skills waiting to be graded, but practices within a societal/historical context.

So, in this thesis I bring to the interpretative work of users a conceptual repertoire around interpretation as emergent from audience research. Within the academy, perhaps discernible within the literacies conversation, there seems to be some kind of ambition associated with similar concerns (although, not

framed via audience studies, admittedly, as I do here). Many are inspired by the idea of reformulating much of what reception, learning, reading and writing come to mean in the context of digital media. These conversations rest on an older conversation around media literacy and dissatisfy many who do not wish to fix media-related prefixes to literacies (see, for instance, Kress, 2009). This argument is broadly that if every medium makes necessary a separate literacy, then the result is a technologically deterministic changing-media-changing-literacies thesis. And yet, new media technologies have fundamentally altered the ways in which one conceives of authorship, reception and so forth.

The conceptual and the empirical

This chapter began with a problem that could perhaps be framed in two ways. First, that there were insights and priorities emergent about engaged and active interpretation of the media from several decades of audience reception studies which could in some ways be applied to the world of users engaging with interactive media. For some substantial time I tried to use this framing, following the suggestion that there were clear points of connection between mass media audiences and media users (both, as Livingstone [2008] suggests, shared a focus on texts, interpretation, divergence and contexts). Another framing, the one which I retain in the chapters that follow, seems to be that our theory of interpretation, generated and tested in a certain range of communicative situations, begs some clarification in a rather differently mediated communicative situation. What might one learn if one carries this conceptual repertoire into a different communicative moment? There is perhaps little to discern between the two framings until we note that the second framing speaks more to audience researchers than those who research users.

Now this all sounds strikingly conceptual. In this concluding section I try to develop the theoretical movement of this thesis – from the posing of a problem, through complicating the problem in one of

many possible ways, to inferring a potential resolution. I note that if the task, in the end, of reflecting on concepts from one mediated condition to another, is conceptual, then my inference at the end is to be conceptual, indicating that the empirical must weave out the conceptual problem and must weave into the conceptual inference in some synergy. This synergy I see being developed in this thesis via concepts. As I elucidate in Chapter 4, two distinct methodologically relevant moments in this thesis – with a rather tangible device of expression – place concepts as the link between a theoretical question/agenda/ambition and an empirical task and between an empirical task and theoretical inferences (Das and Hänska-Ahy, 2011). The first of these moments is apparent in the interview guide, where the theoretical problem has been broken down into secondary and tertiary concepts that prepare this problem to enter the empirical, the task of empirical work. The second point where the moment of synergy between conceptual and empirical returns is in the coding framework, developed as a mix of deductive and inductive modes of inquiry, where the social world is filtered back into a set of concepts, themes and categories which will then lead to my conceptual inference. That, briefly, is the role of the empirical as I see it evolving, in this thesis. Next, using the chapter outline as a narrative device, I break down this task from a theoretical problem, complicating the theoretical problem, distilling it into core concepts, operationalizing those concepts, interpreting data in three levels rather than discrete strands of analyses, returning to a reflection on core concepts to inferences at the theoretical level.

In this chapter I have asked in what ways our knowledge about the interpretation of genres, emergent from many decades of empirical research with mass media audiences, is useful in understanding engagement with new media. This I contextualized within an on-going conversation in our field, through the careers of audience researchers, the parallel trajectories of audiences and interpretation and users and literacies. In Chapter 2, *In pursuit of interpretation*, I complicate the problem, by identifying insights, unanswered questions and challenges in researching audiences and their interpretative work. As a device, this chapter highlights some key criticisms that audience research has received, and focuses in

particular on the audiences to users question. It is for this question that I review the literature that has in fact focused on changing audiences and changing genres, where I draw in links between audiences and users, interpretation and literacies, and so on. In Chapter 3, *The contract of interpretation*, I bring this discussion down to a set of key concepts that this thesis will carry into the social world and later reflect on, in returning back from the empirical to the conceptual. Framed around the text-reader metaphor, I construct an interdisciplinary framework of concepts from reader response studies, reception aesthetics, semiotics and science and technology studies – work and the text, affordances and appropriation, openness and closure, genre and anticipations, horizons of expectations and the interpretative contract. The task in this chapter is to move from a theoretical problem into a clearly outlined set of concepts.

In Chapter 4, *The interface of interpretation*, I operationalize these concepts to enter the empirical world. elaborating the design of a theory-led interview guide, I discuss a primarily theory-led research design, outline the conceptual and empirical focus on interpretation in this thesis, the analytical and interpretative strategy, empirical work, ethics and the pitfalls of my methodological stance. This chapter traces the largely (although qualified) deductive stance that is adopted for the empirical task undertaken in this project. It outlines how the conceptual priorities in this project have shaped its methodological decisions and discusses questions of epistemology, methodology and method, sampling strategy, recruitment and steps in design. It presents the analytical strategy and concludes with an evaluation of this piece of research.

In the next part of the thesis the conceptual problem enters the social world. In Chapter 5, *The resources and limits of interpretation*, I focus on the contexts of consumption and use, where decoders and interpreters are agents, acting within and against structure and relations, with distinctive practices of use emerging in ways similar to the shared commonalities of audiencing. This chapter is the first of four empirical chapters and focuses specifically on context. The children, interviews with whom provide the

empirical material for this thesis, are introduced – as resources and limits in their backgrounds are identified, similarities and differences in these resources and limits spotted. In Chapter 6, *Heterogeneity in interpretation*, I move the empirical focus on contexts to a level of comparison of interpretative work, between these children, as I seek interesting similarities and differences in their interpretative work using a set of themes around text, reader and author – perceiving authorial presence and other users, pushing textual boundaries and collecting stories about the text, for instance.

In Chapter 7, *The task of interpretation*, I move my analysis to a more theoretical clarification of the range of responsibilities involved in interpretation in interactive environments. Inspired by the tasks involved in the act of reading, based on reception aesthetics, I present an analysis in terms of interpretation as play and collaboration, as tackling interruptions, as intertextual navigations and as a task of resistance and critique. I then reach my final empirical chapter. Having first contextualized agents in diversities of usage, practices, resources and restraints, next, having investigated their interpretative work for similarities and differences, then having distilled reflections on the diversity of tasks involved in interpretation itself, in Chapter 8, *Concepts in interpretation*, I use empirical data illustratively to focus on three concepts around interpretation – to reflect on how far these concepts have proved worthwhile in the analysis presented in this thesis. I present a conceptual analysis of *the horizon of expectations*, *the wandering viewpoint* and *gap filling*. At this point, my analysis uses data illustratively to make for a conceptually heavy chapter. And here ends the second part of my thesis, where the theoretical problem introduced, complicated, conceptualized and operationalized in the first part has now been carried into the social world – to be contextualized, comparatively analysed and distilled into reflections on core concepts again.

In the final part of this thesis, the task is inference, represented by Chapter 9, *Connecting interpretative conditions*, where I construct the twin chapter in a sense for Chapter 1. I infer at the same level at which

my original theoretical problem was proposed. I ask how the text has been differentially realized, I indicate that the conceptual repertoire needs retention, for specific theoretical and empirical purposes; and finally, I argue that the many decades of empirical research with audiences could all be of significance not just to those who research audiences today but also those who work with users.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the evolution of an agenda, tracing the personal, intellectual origins of this thesis into a wider, academy-wide context where this merged into a larger individual and collective research agenda. I introduced the distinctive ‘predicaments’ within research with audience reception as well as use, that this thesis seeks to address. I noted that audience reception seems to face uncertainties in the age of the internet, and with new media use and literacies research there is the question of moving beyond homogeneity in practices of use. Both these terms, audiences and users, are conceptually rooted at the interface (Livingstone, 2008) of readers and texts in context, and hence this thesis seeks to link them through the relationship of mutuality embedded in interpretation. And thus, this thesis prioritizes a focus on interpretation as a relationship of mutuality between texts and readers, because this mutuality can offer ways forward out of both technological determinism and also the risk of homogenizing practices of use. It enters its task with key concepts – emergent from audience reception studies – to make these concepts from reception studies work usefully for the analysis of new media use. It uses these concepts as an empirically useful toolkit and concludes at the level of the concepts themselves (Chapter 8).

The attempt that this thesis has made for a Web 2.0 genre must be read in the context of a spectacular trans-media history of understanding audiences. This history has roots within print-focused Germanic reception theory (see Iser, 1978), within film/television-focused audience reception studies with its

notions of intertextuality, tertiary texts (Fiske, 1988) and contextually located interpretations specific to media genre (e.g. Ang, 1985), and today, within internet-focused research with new media users and their literacies, where reception and literacies are both said to signify a ‘necessarily mutual connection between interpreter and that which is interpreted’ (Livingstone, 2008, p. 55). It is that mutual interconnection of technology/user and text/reader that this thesis investigates in analysing youthful interpretations of an online genre.

2. In pursuit of interpretation

A review of literature connecting audiences and users is not the easiest to pen. My central argument is that we have a repertoire of concepts revolving around interpretation, emergent from audience reception analysis, that might need utilization, advancement and extension in the context of new media use. In what follows, I attempt to reveal, first, how the pursuit of interpretation within reception studies has been described divergently, fraught with debates and critiques, and which of these critiques may still matter for the new media user. Next, I focus on the pursuit of interpretation in work with new media users and their literacies and specifically in a group of selected texts, spanning different bodies of literature to reveal how they use the concept of interpretation and the assumptions they make about it, in order to pave the way for a more conceptual treatment of the topic in the next chapter, the *contract of interpretation*.

The subtitle of this thesis – *From audiences to users* – sets up the grand task of connecting research in and about mediated environments that are fantastically diverse. For one, the audience as a focus of empirical and theoretical advances in media and communications research has more than half a century of research behind it, over the course of which the term has been assumed to be insignificant, had revived interest in it, been celebrated, over-celebrated, revised, renewed, renewals questioned, critiqued, some critiques responded to, and then, at times been left alone as new media and newer things have occupied academic interests of some, although not all. In parallel, as McQuail envisaged in the previous century, ‘the problems surrounding the concept (of the audience) stem mainly from the fact that a single and simple word is being applied to an increasingly diverse and complex reality, open to alternative and competing theoretical formulations’ (1997, p. 1), for audiences are a product of both social context and the provisions of a particular medium. And responding to this last question, of the medium, after

accounting for the audience as mass, as group, as market, once he reaches interactive media, he predicts that new media would soon render the term audience a misnomer, and, true enough, for a very long time now users have been studied.

Unlike ‘audience research’, which immediately conjures up a narrative of a body of empirical research with the audiences of film and television texts, ‘user research’ might confuse, perplex and raise eyebrows. Why is that? Indeed there are parallels – those studying the effects of media content on vulnerable audiences still remain interested in the question in the age of new media (see, for instance, Schensul and Burkholder, 2005; Weber et al, 2006; Anderson and Bushman, 2001; Hinduja and Patchin, 2007), those who studied specifics of the medium and the provisions of the technology, perhaps now have more to do – consider research happening in computer systems, information systems research. Those who studied fanzines and fan cultures now have an entire array of fan productions and user-generated content to study (e.g. Jenkins, 1992, 2002, 2006; Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; Baym, 2000, 2007; Gray, 2003, Rehak, 2003; van Zoonen, 2004; Burn, 2006; Bird, 2009) and age-old concerns of media and communications research about intersectional social axes remain pertinent in the age of the internet (Hall and Newbury, 1999; Nakamura, 2000, 2002; Cassell et al, 2006; Kann et al, 2007; Goldman et al, 2008; Livingstone and Markham, 2008; Magnuson and Dundes, 2008; Willett, 2008; McQuillan and d’Haenens, 2009). And yet, the image conjured up by audience reception research cannot quite be conjured up by user research. The body of work which contributes to a theory of users (more on this in the next chapter) shares many (unarticulated) parallels with audience reception studies in its images of the implied user, affordances, technology-as-text metaphor and so forth, for instance (Livingstone and Das, 2009), and as this thesis will try to argue, it is in many ways not entirely problematic to place audiences and users in the same frame. Ethnographers will argue that the focus in this discussion has been much too media-centric. Instead, if one commenced from the everyday contexts of people, groups and societies, from the ‘kaleidoscope of everyday life’, as Radway has reminded (Radway, 1988), one

would not perhaps frame the audiences to users question thus. But even then, there must be something specific to the provisions of a particular media technology, a specific text or genre which shapes the audience experience in myriad ways. Consider the calls by many audience researchers not to lose sight of the screen itself in looking at the contexts surrounding the screen, however significant they are (Press and Livingstone, 2006), reiterating the audience researcher's intrinsic connection to texts and textual analysis.

I shall frame this chapter as a review that first locates my key question within the history of audiences. The purpose for this first part of the thesis is not to attempt a fast-paced recap of all the empirical research that has gone before in spectating, listening, viewing, reading, watching, interacting and producing to review the history of studying interpretation, but to begin from the stories which have already been told of the field. The risk in such a move is that the voices of empirical readers, listeners, and viewers seem subordinated to the realm of conceptual debates within research about them. But I contextualize my thesis in the backdrop of these debates, critiques and disagreements which characterise audience reception studies because then we shall be able to ask if and how these questions might transfer to the age of the internet. Next I shall trace the parallel history, particularly in recent times, of researchers trying to shape their agendas to fit new media environments where media technologies have diversified, radically altering the directionality of media content flows, generating a host of new questions about user-generated content, contesting notions of author and reader and interestingly enough, repeating many mistakes that one thought the field had moved beyond (for instance – losing sight of heterogeneity in use in the 'digital natives' argument). In this section I shall map out connections between media audiences and their interpretative work and new media users and their literacies. The audiences-literacies connection shall hopefully provide another kind of a backdrop to the kind of questions I ask in this thesis. Third, in a less fast-paced section, this history, on-going and developing as this thesis is written, will be traced through a range of different types of work – and here I shall pay

specific attention to a selection of texts that have specifically looked at the question of transforming audiences. Finally, I narrow this all down to a question of inter-disciplinarity in the theoretical frameworks of audience researchers for the repertoires that sustain this work hail from a range of different fields. When this thesis began by saying it is interested in ‘testing’ a conceptual repertoire around the interpretation of texts, it makes a choice about which repertoire it is particularly interested in. This is the body of literary reception theory emerging from within European reception aesthetics, and is just one part of a diverse set of theoretical frameworks that audience research has successfully worked with.

In pursuit of interpretation: mass media and the story as told...

The conceptual and empirical appearance of audiences and their interpretative work in the study of mediated communication was a significant moment for media and communication theory. Politically, it was significant, first, because it helped balance a conversation on the impact of the media on an unthinking audience by irreversibly establishing an interpretative, critical and sometimes resistant viewer who decodes media content using a variety of symbolic resources, and second, because cultural and ethnographic explorations of audiences informed questions of identity, communality, resistance and essentially, politics, thereby offering an inquiry into real audiences instead of reading off dominant messages in media discourses. As the narrative of empirical audience studies developed with the coming together, if not the convergence, of a variety of fields (see Livingstone, 1998), the decoder of media messages got a real life context outside of laboratory settings, the reader of romance novels was situated in communities of interpretation (cf. Radway, 1984), and the laudable pursuit of meaning in representation (e.g. Modleski, 1984) was accompanied by the pursuit of meaning at the interface of representation and interpretation (e.g. Ang, 1985).

In sum, the matter of interpretation being an active and engaged process was first ignored, in the face of powerful media effects propositions (for various positions on this see Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Anderson and Avery, 1988; Emmers-Sommer and Allen, 1999; Livingstone, 1996; Bryant and Oliver, 2009; for a review, see Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007), to which uses and gratifications research was taken to have provided the first responses (Katz et al, 1973; see also Katz et al, 2003; Blumler, 1979; McLeod and Becker, 1981; Palmgreen et al, 1985; Rosengren et al, 1985; Rayburn, 1996), which in turn was reviewed (see Carey and Kreiling, 1974; Swanson, 1979; Windahl, 1981; Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld, 1983; McQuail, 1984; Lin, 1996) for a host of reasons, not least among which was an overt focus on individual needs and gratifications (see Elliott, 1974), and this critique countered as well (see Barker, 2006). But the interpretative work of audiences had long occupied the interest of the academy – consider for instance Herta Herzog’s account of radio listeners (1942). An impetus came from cultural studies, especially from feminist traditions and ethnographic methods through the 1980s and 1990s, where interpretative work was contextualized within relations of structure and power (see Lotz, 2000 for a review; see Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985, 1991; Gordon, 1988; Brown, 1990, 1994; Behar, 1993; McRobbie, 1976; 1991; Bobo, 1995; Brunson, 1997; Press, 1991; Press and Cole, 1999). But yet, as Hay et al point out, the 1980s were fraught with a sense of mission and yet also a sense that no one had got it right (Hay et al, 1996). A split seemed significant – the American academy regarded European reader response as too jargon-laden and theoretical and the American mass communications tradition was regarded as too quantitative. But other splits seemed evident as well.

The work through the 1980s was not solely contributed to by cultural studies (see Livingstone, 2006). Mass communication researchers from other traditions (social psychology for instance) contributed to unpacking the relations between text and reader, both in a genre-specific manner (e.g. Livingstone, 1998a) and in comparative, trans-cultural analyses (e.g. Liebes and Katz, 1993). It is the latter that gave to the field the concept of viewers’ work for instance – as Katz asked, do viewers work? (Katz, 1996)

Quoting from Schramm et al (1961, cited in Katz 1996), he notes that their discussion of the role of the reader is linked to their claim that the text neither dictates the reader nor is it an inkblot. And thus the field got the idea of viewers' work (something I return to in Chapter 6) – 'what interests us, is not what people take from television, but what they put into it' (Katz, 1996, p. 11). He writes of different kinds of work, where 'Morley's viewers [...] do ideological work, Livingstone's viewers do referential, ludic and aesthetic work' (Katz, 1996, p. 13), referring to Morley's Nationwide (1980) study and Livingstone's research (1998) with soap opera viewers.

In parallel, linked with cultural studies through the 1980s was the rise of genre-specific, often ethnographic studies of the interpretations of film and television texts in contexts, and the valuable pursuit of pleasure, resistance, critique, play and identity populated audience studies (see Long, 1986; Brown, 1990; Ang and Hermes, 1991; Morley, 1992, 1993; Allen, 1999; Bailey, 2005). Radical contextualism offered by Janice Radway (1988) 20 years ago held two possibilities. One was the promise of contextual richness which is still today being interestingly adopted by many audience ethnographers, leading to thick accounts of cultural reception in everyday life (e.g. Bird, 2003). The other, as Ang put it, in different words, was a feeling of endlessness in this journey (Ang, 1991).

As Helen Wood appropriately remarks in her recent (2004) essay on Radway's *Reading the Romance*, Radway's 1984 book was set in American cultural landscapes but it mirrored the British intellectual tradition in cultural studies and theory appropriately, and has, since then, survived as a canonical work. Radway's work was one of the earlier ones in a series of rich, qualitative accounts of reading practices – see for instance work by Ang (1985) or Liebes and Katz (1993). I choose to go in-depth into Radway's work here primarily because it represents a moment in audience reception studies that was exciting in the new discoveries being made about audiences – audiences are active, identities are mediated, readings are complex and diverse and this all leads us into real, lived issues of power in myriad ways. For this project, which is written at another, albeit differently, exciting moment for audience studies (the

concerns and challenges seem to have shifted now, although many old questions are still of relevance as I have been arguing), reviewing a text from about three decades ago seems useful for it has much to teach us.

Radway's *Reading the Romance* was 'conceived in response to a set of theoretical questions about literary texts' and her aim was to 'see whether it was possible to investigate reading empirically so as to make "accurate" statements about the historical and cultural meaning of literary production and consumption' (p 4). She assumed from the outset (following Stanley Fish) that meanings (textual interpretations) are constructed through the specific strategies of interpretive communities and it was this which led her to contrast textual analyses of the genre of romance novels with responses from fans of the genre. She departed from Fish's treatment of interpretive communities in the sense that her communities were not literary analysts but rather social groups, but she herself remained dissatisfied with the extent to which she had been able to theorise this. She does, however, follow David Morley's reminder that a departure from an encoding-decoding model towards a more genre-based understanding of reading might prove fruitful. Her own summary of what she did and how (p 10 –11) shows this. First, she focused on the socio-material situation of Smithsonian women to ask how this analyses their interpretive practices i.e. the starting point was the context of reading. Second, she made use of not only observations but a very detailed questionnaire (provided in the book's appendices) about their habits, practices, preferences i.e. she combined ethnographic inquiry with some of the tools of survey research, it seems. And third, she used psychoanalytic theory to understand the category of pleasure in reading.

Her findings were both that her readers knew how and why they read romances, but also that they operated under cultural assumptions and corollaries that constitute their social contexts. She also makes an important analytical distinction between the meaning of the act and the meaning of the text as read. So the 'act of reading' for her readers was seen as both combative (of other-directed social roles) and

compensatory (i.e. allowing them to focus on themselves and their pleasure). The ‘mild protest’ which Radway sees in this act of reading, is also something, she feared, would be seen as not enough for the protest for social change demanded by feminists, rightly. But she argues, adequately – “We as feminists might help this change along by first learning to recognise that romance reading originates in very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited, protest” (p 220).

Radway’s account of 42 ‘Smithsonian’ women interpreting romance novels is especially instructive for the ethnographic nature of the inquiry. This is not to say that one can and always should delve into the kaleidoscope of everyday life (Radway, 1988) for how often is that entirely possible? But the priorities that are evident throughout the work – consider Radway’s relationship with Dot or Dorothy, and the care with which that rapport was established, or the familial nature and contexts of viewing that she pursued – these, without doubt, are not only methodological strong points but ones which need to be carried forward, if not in ethnographies that always satisfy the demands of the anthropologist but at least in an ethnographic spirit that begins with, stays close to and prioritises the contexts of cultural consumption.

Radway had a rich context to her work – Morley’s *Nationwide* study had come before, Angela McRobbie was contributing brilliant feminist perspectives to practices of reading, the scene was ripe for *Reading the Romance*. Today, dozens of empirical articles flood our journals on teens and the internet, on mobile phone use in cultures halfway around the globe, and perhaps a point of importance is to remember to conduct studies, which, when being empirically rich, somewhere excite us theoretically, take us forward conceptually. *Reading the Romance* did that, for it established forever an irreversible impetus to look at identities when one looks at audiences, to take power dynamics in familial contexts of viewing into account when one explores interpretative communities.

The empirical tone of chapters in *Reading the Romance* seems to be set for identifying patterns – all the more laudable considering she was conducting in-depth, qualitative work. Searching for patterns following demographic axes is always difficult, but Radway's search for meanings that aligned themselves closely with the text, or away from it, helps her make a crucial point, that "similar readings are produced because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes which they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter" (pp 67-68).

In discussing *Reading the Romance* in later years, Radway points out another achievement of the study, one that is now again being taken up by scholars (see Kress, 2003 on genres for instance). She outlines that there needs to be a focus shift away from simplistic models of activity and passivity and encoding and decoding towards understanding interpretations by genre - where genre is far more than a typology, where genre is a set of norms which may include and exclude, and where modes of engagement with a text are shaped to some extent by the genres people engage with.

Fourth, in many ways, Radway's work, by bringing together psychoanalytical theories or feminist theories of representation into her work with interpretation, indicates a convergence of the richness of textual analysis with the richness of empirical audience research. This, while seemingly simple, is difficult to achieve in projects that deal with audiences and the text is very often lost sight of or simplistically accounted for by the researcher before embarking on findings about how audiences diverge from or stick to the intended meaning. By bringing together representation and interpretation, genre and reception, text and reader in the theoretical underpinnings to her analysis, Radway reminds us of a simple but often missing convergence of research with texts and with that with readers.

My main critique of Radway's canonical work is not that it was naively optimistic as many critics have argued, or that it read pleasure as resistance. I do not think it did, although undoubtedly much of

empirical studies have unfortunately gone on to celebrate divergence as resistance and misread questions of power. But Radway perhaps suffered from a desire to judge. Wood, in her essay, expresses this well – “It seems that Radway is struggling over passing judgement; while she sees romantic texts as problematic in their ideology, she recognizes that the intricacies of the women’s reading strategies mean that they are hardly the dopes rendered by popular discourse” (Wood, 2004, p 150) What is the solution? To refrain from the individual spirit that doubtless resides in every researcher so that not one sentence in written up research can be read as judgement? Perhaps this is more a problem of representing ourselves as researchers in written up research than a colossal error in the research process itself.

And this introduces other critiques – ones that emerged about the feminist identity of the researcher and a desire to produce more feminists in the women she spoke to, as Ang or even Modleski has noted (see Wood, 2004 for an excellent account of these critiques). But this is perhaps to do with the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In this thesis, when I speak to children about their strategies to protect themselves from potential online harms, am I not treading, even if ever so unconsciously, into the world of the didactic perhaps, and sometimes, even, the world of advice and counselling? This critique of Radway’s relationship with the Smithsonian women is instructive to bear in mind for any project where researcher-research equations sometimes straddle uncomfortable boundaries.

And here on, one watched the growth of critiques of these projects – that the text-reader metaphor and its clear focus on interpretative activity was merely re-packaging gratifications research (for gratifications research see also Katz et al, 1973), that rapidly accumulating evidence of diversity and difference in interpretations was not really taking theory forward (e.g. Morris, 1988), that audience research in celebrating interpretative activity was celebrating limitless polysemy to the extent of ignoring textual power (e.g. Condit 1989), that this wave, phrased as the ‘new revisionism’ by Curran (1990), was merely rediscovering things discovered earlier, that audience research tends to use concepts such as meaning

and sense making often without thinking about what is exactly meant by these terms (Dahlgren, 1998), or that this all neglected real issues of power by celebrating the micro (Corner, 1991).

Some of this was responded to, as Morley points out – the micro does embed issues of politics in the grain of everyday life, which after all, was the purpose of the feminist agenda (Morley, 2006), and that the division between the public knowledge and popular culture projects (Corner, 1991) defined politics far too narrowly (see Gray, 1999). In contrast to Morris's critique of rapidly accumulating studies, Barker bemoans the lack of empirical, real audiences in much theory (Barker, 1998). Swanson draws to our attention 'the extent to which Blumler, Gurevitch and Katz's sketch for gratifications research in 1985 was influenced by the work of critical theorists and reception analysts and, on the other side, the way in which some insights of uses and gratifications research have provided foils against which Morley has developed his own approach to family television and domestic media' (Swanson, 1986, p. 58). As Boyd-Barrett (1995) points out, a distinguishing feature of Morley's work in his eyes is the importance 'it attributes to different readings of any given text and the relationship of such differences to cultural and social contexts' (1995, p. 499). Complexity of the interrelationship of readings cannot be mapped onto easily privileged categories which link with demographic attributes.

The text-reader metaphor that lies at the heart of all work with interpretation, and which will be unpacked in a differently mediated context in this thesis, has received critique, if not for anything else, at least for its literary bias. Responding to Lull's (1988) critique of doing away with texts and readers altogether, Bennett asks why the term 'audience' is preferable instead. He says 'the inquiries that are currently conducted...represent, or figure, their objects of studying in different ways: as audiences, readers, publics, receptants, interpreters, viewers, spectators or listeners. Whichever of these conceptions is chosen...will...affect how a particular inquiry is conducted: what it looks for, how it frames its object theoretically, what methods are used, how the results are represented, where and how those results are

circulated, and to what effect' (1996, p. 146). Contrasting the empirical reader of reception studies with the theoretically active reader of literary aesthetics, he points out that 'if the provenance of the "determined active reader" has been largely sociological, that of the "indecipherably active reader" has been chiefly literary' (p. 153). It is perhaps with some sense of desperation that he makes the point that the mutuality of the text-reader relationship is forever indecipherable as the literary reader is 'one whose activity, while subject to an endless theoretical affirmation, is simultaneously unfathomable since neither the place of the reader that reads nor that of the text that is read is susceptible, even in principle, to a definite determination' (p. 153).

This all indicates a fine mesh of flows and counter-flows of ideas and dis/agreements dotting the empirical pursuit of interpretation within reception analysis. Scholars have produced ambitious meta-theoretical accounts that have been torn down by their equally experienced colleagues as teleological and sometimes just bad (Barker, 2006; also see Morley, 2006)⁴. Scholars continue to be in disagreement in their intellectual positions on the past (see, for instance, the divergent positions⁵ on the centrality of encoding/decoding in the historiography of the field), their subtly and not-so-subtly selective reconstructions of histories, their takes on the global, transnational future, their selection of research priorities and their positions on different sides of many divides. Most importantly, critiques both external and internal have been fierce, well-researched and often interestingly, prophetic. There have also been scholars who have repeatedly drawn attention to answering the accumulated body of critiques (e.g. Livingstone, 1998), or to the crucial fact that (most of) the empirical accounts have largely been generated from Western industrialized societies, majorities and mainstreams though in this decade this concern is being addressed using diverse entries (see Mankekar, 1999; Abu Lughod, 2004; Sood et al,

⁴ While writing this I was acutely conscious of Martin Barker's worry about students who 'try out' audience research for dissertations and then proceed to write 'about' audiences (Barker, 2006).

⁵ This debate is interesting. One may draw attention to Livingstone's observation that an adoption of the text-reader metaphor may have made the textual dissociations of audience studies much more difficult (Livingstone, 1998). Opinions differ as David Morley (2006), Pertti Alasuutari (1999) amongst others stress on the centrality of the 1981 text (see the *Communication Review* 2006 Press-Barker-Morley exchange).

2004; Valdivia, 2004; Kim, 2005). Over the last two decades, audiences have developed as constructs for which adjectives have freely flowed – the fugitive construct (Bratich, 2005), the discursive construct (Alasuutari, 2000) and the very relational (and by extension unequal) nature of interactive interpretation perhaps produced the relational construct (Livingstone, 1998b). Audiences have been linked to other groups – publics (see Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Couldry et al, 2007; see also Livingstone and Das, 2009a), to citizens and consumers (e.g. Livingstone, et al 2005), to families and households (see Livingstone and Das, 2010) – and audiences have been classified. See for instance, Blumler's (1996) typology of generalized audience images – audience constructed as markets, public, fans of taste cultures, social group, involved audiences, or Anderson's 1996 classification – the encoded audience, the analytic audience (produced by critics), or empirical audiences which can be transcendent empirical audiences (any adult of 18 is equal to another), the aggregate audience ('the working woman', or consider in the case of this thesis young people or 'digital natives', the situated audience (for instance, within ethnography), the strategic audience (bounded by a set of interpretative practices – take the concept of the interpretative community), or engaged audience (fans). Over time, methodological insights (derived from ethnography in particular) have gained primacy, often assuming ethnography is the only way to take audience research forward; others from psychology, quantitative research, other qualitative methods, social-psychology are perhaps elbowed out. The year 2006 saw the journal *Communication Review* carry two much needed issues where scholars debated the future of the field of audience studies. Implicit in most of these accounts was dissatisfaction with the way audience studies had been moving, yet the paths offered as solutions to the dissatisfaction seem indistinct. In the 2006 issue of *Communication Review*, much dissatisfaction seemed to stem from the accumulation of empirical accounts that had not been adding much to theory (Morley, 2006). Perhaps the impasse Morris (1988) had identified two decades ago resulted from a 'frustration with our lack of ability to speak both in a cohesive manner to one another [...] and also to those in different fields apart from audience study, who might not share either our political or methodological predispositions' (Press, 2006, p. 97).

In any case, the implication of this all for communication and cultural studies was first, that at the level of the individual, we could now theorize the role of the reader (Eco, 1979) with appropriate empirical accounts of lived practices of interpretative work (Liebes and Katz, 1993), and second, that the interpretative activity of audiences, despite being an admittedly media-oriented construct, now became visible in relation to a range of other societal roles of people, instead of being distinctly different from any of them, thereby making audience studies meet other disciplines which had not hitherto engaged themselves with real audiences as such. Audiences, understood as communities of interpretation (Fish, 1980), met research with gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth (see, for instance, the contribution of studies of audiences as fans in this context; Jenkins, 1992, 2006); audiences were theorized as publics, bringing together people/publics from democratic participation with the audience of media theory (see Livingstone and Lunt, 1994); audience studies met studies of ethnic identity and connections (see, for instance, Gillespie, 1995; Georgiou, 2001); audiences were conceptualized as citizens (Livingstone, et al, 2005), as consumers, users and even producers of media content (Bruns, 2008). Also, not insignificantly, this narrative of academic audience research, in some ways interfaced with the real audiences of media content as frequently, audience researchers have been called on to inform policy (e.g. Buckingham, 2005).

This array of empirical research with active, engaged, critical and resistant interpretation has accumulated over decades and a range of critiques has accumulated. Some have noted how audience reception research has ended up neglecting macro issues of power in its focus on micro processes of engagement, although as others have pointed out, the mapping of power onto macro and micro is neither straightforward nor justified. The critique of over-celebrating divergence is one that needs to be taken seriously for texts are neither innocent, nor is all divergence significant. I have tried to keep this

critique in mind in the analysis I present on interpretative diversity. I have consciously tried to move beyond the matter of obvious ‘activity’ – perhaps evidenced in technical expertise and skills – to draw out broader and perhaps more significant themes – that necessarily link use with participation, being critical and resistant, taking initiatives and pushing boundaries. In the end, perhaps there is consensus that ‘audiences do not really exist simply as audiences; they are constructs that we in communication studies have created, abstracting them out of their sociological context to help us study mass media and popular culture reception, usually in a quantifiable, measurable “scientific” way’ (Press, 1996, p. 117).

Going back to McQuail’s (1997) point about audiences being a misnomer in the age of interactive media, the most relevant critique as far as this thesis has been concerned has been one about the future of conducting audience research in a different technological context. Had we reached the end of audiences in an interactive, networked world, that is, was this a rich agenda that had now run its race (Livingstone, 2004)? Which of the questions and debates I outlined above are important to carry into what follows? The achievement of establishing interpretative divergence is as crucial it seems in the face of the digital natives argument (Das, 2010; forthcoming in 2011) as the critique that we might well over-do a celebration of divergence yet again. Shall we, in focusing on diversities in use, simply reach differences in practices of use, or shall we, as anticipated, reach differently realized texts? The celebration of endless polysemy that Condit (1989) warned audience researchers about might be useful to keep in mind in our celebrations of user-generated content and the agency of the users of online media, for if texts are limitlessly polysemic, shall not those who produce them evade all responsibility (Boyd-Barrett, 1995)?

And this thesis asks, amidst the clutter of the digital, have we anywhere to go with the concept of interpretation and the repertoire that we have built around it? Will this repertoire prove of use and in which ways can it be extended? This last challenge is an interesting one, for while on the one hand it reminds us of significant ways in which the audiences of mass media differ from the users of networked

media, it opens up a conversation on the theoretical relevance of interpretation in the age of new media, a conversation which requires by default a disciplinary mix of repertoires – not just of media studies and user studies, but many other fields, and this is something I take up in the next chapter. I will conclude in this thesis that the conceptual repertoire around interpretation, as emergent from within audience studies, remains valid, if in many ways unsatisfactory, to employ in the contexts of interactive media. This stance has important conceptual implications for the study of audiences because it takes forward the theoretical repertoire that lies at the heart of audience studies in mass-mediated environments into a rather different textual condition.

In pursuit of interpretation: new media, and an unfolding story

Today, as we transition from mass-mediated to interactive communication, we must ask, if, like the contexts of its development, the insights of audience reception studies too, are tied to a specific technological context located in a moment of mediation that is fast being left behind. Many of the questions asked by audience researchers seem more pertinent today than ever before. Audience studies asked how people divergently made sense of media texts, how audiences participated in civil society, how people responded critically to dominant messages. Today, in a networked moment of multimodal and user-generated media, consider for instance, the following questions, on the new media research agenda. ‘How do people follow hypertext pathways? Does it add new dimensions of writing? Are new practices of reading emerging? Are these more hospitable to alternative views, more inclusive of difference? More generally, what are the emerging skills and practices of new media users? How do people variously “read” the World Wide Web? What practices surround the use of the web, email, chat and so forth? What competencies or literacies are people thereby developing?’ (Livingstone, 2004, p 80)

In what follows I attempt to articulate a sense of guarded optimism. First, I indicate that audience research is already embedded in the age of the internet, and second, that much remains to be done, as the field requires further conceptual analysis to be conducted. This is possible solely through extensive empirical engagement to suitably revise and refine its repertoire, for all cannot be transported across communicative moments in a straightforward manner. To articulate the former position, I trace how the media literacies conversation seems to be reframing much of what has already been discussed in the domain of audience reception studies. To outline the more reserved position that much more is required by way of conceptual clarification, I propose further work on genres of both texts as well as interpretation.

Audiences and interpretation, users and literacies

I suggested in Chapter 1 that one of the ways in which audience research has been carried into the age of interactive media was through research with the media and digital literacies of users. It has been suggested that literacies are a way in which audiences and users link (Livingstone, 2008). Away from the generic stability of televisual media, as new genres of social media emerge and as critical questions are raised about youthful practices in online environments, audience reception studies face the challenge of changing audiences (Livingstone, 2004) and semantic uncertainties between *users* and *audiences* (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006), where unanswered questions remain around the genres of new media, diverse ways in which readers read the web and so forth. In new media research, there is an impressive focus on new media texts (see, for instance, the analysis presented in Pappacharissi, 2009, or in Brügger, 2009), on the affordances of new technologies (Hutchby, 2001), or on the prior construction of ‘reading paths’ (Kress, 2003) in verbal and visual representations. However, a parallel account of new modes of interpretative engagement with these exciting new genres remains difficult to find. Thus, a predicament of audience reception analysis seems to be an uncertainty in carrying forward its agenda to the age of the

internet, theoretically as well as empirically. It is possible to note the link between these two fields with some optimism as a connection also between audiences and users, for it has been suggested (Livingstone, 2008) that both these fields – reception analysis and digital literacies – should retain a focus on divergent textual interpretations at the heart of the diverse use of technologies, as this would facilitate a focus on both changing media *technologies* (a distributed and fragmenting *text*) and on diversity in practices of *use* (creative, collaborative *reception*). That link, of hermeneutic engagement between media and user/text and reader, makes mass media audiences and new media literacies *interface* concepts (Livingstone, 2008). Both concepts converge at the interface of readers and texts, with shared ambitions of looking at agentic, creative and playful engagement with a mediated world.

There are worries about literacies, especially new media literacies or digital literacies. One is that much about ‘digital’ is still ‘print’, not just in terms of written text being available (because by ‘print’ we must include images as well), and therefore ‘digital’ literacies don’t work, in its being too exclusive a term that doesn’t quite grasp the multimodal and multimedia nature of the media environment; or even that in the focus on the technology, there may be a danger in losing sight of the content carried by the technology (Bazalgette, at a round table with Blake, Hassel and Livingstone, 2008⁶). The academy is not too sure of what it means by the term, edited collections offering different approaches to the concept, still wavering around outlining a scope (see Snyder and Beavis, 2004; Lankshear and Knobel, 2008), theorists still unsure of the very prefix ‘digital’ in digital literacies (Kress, 2009). The worry over the many prefixes of literacies – cyber, digital, media, new media, techno, information, multi and so on – has been a worry expressed over technological determinism. Scholars express discomfort that these prefixes may not ultimately make much sense, and that the conversation may be hijacked over to technologies (or texts) alone (Snyder and Beavis, 2004; Kress, 2009).

⁶ Accessed from http://preview.channel4learning.com/espresso/clipbank/html/ttv_features_medialiteracy1.html on 4 March 2011.

In any case, media and communications research has of late focused on the cognitive, cultural and social dimensions of digital literacies, also addressing a growing public interest in the nature and implications of people's activities online. Voices across multiple disciplines and domains increasingly discuss 'digital literacies', a nebulously defined term emergent out of academic conversations on media literacies, perhaps with industrial origins, increasingly central to policy priorities, and expected by some scholars to incorporate more notions of exclusion and division than is commonly supposed (Sefton-Green et al, 2009). Debates abound as well. Questions are increasingly being asked about heterogeneity and diversity in the nature and quality of internet use across convenient groupings of apparently uniform youthful expertise (e.g. Livingstone and Haddon, 2009). There are tugs of war around the centrality of technology in the literacies conversation (e.g. Snyder and Beavis, 2004; Kress, 2009) and the foregrounding of technical skills over social practices (Snyder and Beavis, 2004; Buckingham, 2006; 2010). Diverse approaches from cognitive skills in processing information (Potter, 2004) to rich ethnographies of in- and out-of-classroom literacy practices (see Hull and Schultz, 2001) inform this conversation, while uncertainties remain around definitions and purposes (Bachmair and Bazalgette, 2007). And, media literacy is increasingly engaging academics who interface with policy (e.g. Livingstone, 2008; O'Neill and Barnes, 2008). Scholars point out that much research seems to define literacies solely in terms of practical skills varying by technological innovations (tipping the balance in favour of technologies alone), or treats youthful engagement with the media as a monolith (ignoring diversity). Hence, the problem of digital literacies research seems to be a lack of focus on the mutuality of technologies/texts and users/readers, for this mutuality could offer ways forward out of both technological determinism and also the risk of homogenizing practices of use.

Concepts of the interface

This account of connections between audiences and literacies was one of optimism. There is reason for such optimism when one notes the intriguing ways in which audience research has already connected with a range of other agendas, all of which are rooted in the world of the interactive. A 30-country European project on *Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies* places all of this at the centre of its priorities, and is just taking off as this thesis is being written up. Audience researchers who have spent many years researching mass media audiences are reframing and reshaping the agenda for the future of the field, on this project, and also elsewhere. But this optimistic account must be tempered.

Core concepts of reception, interpretation, text and genre are now difficult to define; indeed precise claims about their utility for changing media environments can no longer be made. The battle of terminologies in media and communications studies around audiences and/or users (see Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006 for the debate around this) has been interdisciplinary. Scholars in education studies and critical new literacies, for instance, have shared the same anxieties around ‘naming’⁷, naming being not just a semantic dilemma but also one that raises key questions about the nature of media use and interpretation, and the conventions, norms and structure of the media itself, which today, must include technologies and texts whose terms are still unclear (Peters, 2009). In leaving us perplexed about terminology, with new terms such as ‘prosumers’ and then ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2008) emerging, the argument for the end of audiences has generally been that in an age of media convergence, ‘writing back’, hybridization, multimodality (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), the very concept of the audience is too ‘passive’ to work, ‘interactivity’⁸ emerging to be a key word. The trendy puzzles have even perhaps started to shift from mass interactive over to the endless varieties of the interactive itself as new interfaces usher us into the semantic web (Berners Lee et al, 2001; Zimmer, 2009). As audience scholars

⁷ I borrow the word ‘naming’ from Gunther Kress’s talk at the Institute of Education in London, in late 2008, on the problems one is faced with in the age of interactive media with previously unproblematic terms such as ‘text’, ‘genre’ and so forth.

⁸ For this see also Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) and Walther et al (2005).

who made the move from mass to interactive media shall point out, interactivity has complicated many things, including the taken-for-granted media-audience relationship (Jenkins, 2002; Livingstone, 2004, 2008 and others). Interactivity itself, a much-used term in everyday academic and non-academic parlance, remains, as Jensen (2005a) would argue, a notoriously difficult concept to define⁹ for if interactivity is to mean interactive interfaces between media and user, it must also mean collaborative interaction between user and user, the former being technologically and socially novel, the latter with roots in age-old face-to-face communication and intersected by new media technologies and their affordances (Hutchby, 2001). In new media research, the early days of interest in hypertext and the web had seen much work in departments of information systems, linguistics, library science and communications studies on hyper text and hyper reading (Sloan, 1995; Broad, 1999; Parry, 2007), most of these providing rich analyses of hypertextual domains (i.e., the structure of literary works online, the narrativity of massively multiplayer gaming domains and so on), producing insightful account of texts, but often constructing an '*implied reader*' (Iser, 1974) without the empirical focus on real interpretative work. Insights developed in those early hypertext years are still drawn attention to today as texts that may well be useful for studies of online textuality. Promising accounts of comparative discourse analysis of SNSs (Papacharissi, 2009), textual environments of web pages (Brügger, 2009) and hyperlinks and print parallels (Zimmer, 2009) abound. Similarly, in recent years new literacy studies (see Snyder, 1998) have spoken of new dimensions of reading and writing, added to which has been a reminder of meaning production and 'reception' in interactive media forms (e.g. Jensen, 2007). But little empirical research followed with 'real' processes of hyper reading and writing, thereby cordoning off these debates from many other lively areas of research.

In the work around literacies and its prefixes, there are two broad kinds of prefixes being added: one is to do with medium and the other to do with mode (distinct but mutually influenced). So, on the one hand, digital or print literacies, and on the other, visual, verbal, audiovisual literacies, and then perhaps

⁹ See www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/180_003-030.pdf

an amalgamation of both in ‘multiliteracies’. Kress, in his approach to visual literacies, does use a prefix, and his prefixes are always to do with modal changes, and modalities. There is indeed perhaps some tension between those who opt for modal prefixes and those who opt for media prefixes in their comments on XYZ literacies. As Kress (2005, p. 6) points out, ‘I use the term “mode” for the culturally and socially produced resources for representation and “medium” as the term for the culturally produced means for distribution of these representations-as-meanings, that is as messages’. It is not merely splitting hairs over semantic issues, but actually prioritizing on conceptual analysis and clarification when one notes that it is important to keep in mind that mode and medium are not coterminous, as we think of converging our conceptual resources across audiences and users, or of cross-fertilizing concepts across fields. Indeed the ‘digital’ presents many modes, and a single mode can simultaneously make itself visible across print, screens, and so on. My attention to ‘mode and medium’ in this section is because of the increasing divergence in the prefixes to literacies. With media literacy being complemented if not replaced (albeit amidst disagreement) by digital literacies, and with edited collections on digital literacies proving to be increasingly uneven in what scholars would choose to mean by the term, the question largely seems to hover around the fact that while both mode and medium matter, it is the medium prefix that raises problems, and most usually the problem is a concern about technological determinism.

This accommodates the complexities of multimodality, necessarily relevant in the age of the digital. It also provides a ground for thinking about not just reading and writing, but also reception (as we know it in reception studies) as now being a fused product of both. All of these concerns are central then, to a project that looks at generic forms and interpretative practices at work. In Kress’s work there is always an attempt to describe ‘what is going on’ and to search for theories ‘that can integrate such descriptions into explanatory frameworks’ (Kress, 2005, p. 6). In a piece that was later to be drawn into a debate by

Prior (2005)¹⁰, Kress draws attention to the ‘reader’s task’, and the reader’s task doubtless has roots in reception aesthetics. Later, in Chapter 8, I discuss the concept of filling gaps, and one may notice, in Kress’s account too, there is the question, ‘what was the reader’s task, and what or where was the reader’s freedom to act?’ (Kress, 2005, p. 7). Kress argues for a revolutionary shift from writing to image (hence the use of the past tense). On a web page Kress argues for what he calls reading by design, ‘In effect, out of material presented (by an author, designer and/or design-team?) on a page, the reader designs a coherent complex sign that corresponds to the need she or he has’ (Kress, 2005, p. 8).

Audience reception would then make two arguments: first, that this focus on filling gaps, on interpreting was and still is necessary on a trans-media continuum, and second, while Kress says this displaces traditional models of decoding, it does still bear traces of the uses and gratification model in his focus on ‘needs’. Audience reception in this case probably shifts the focus from mode to medium and asks, in the light of a history of looking at interpretation as a socially located practice, questions about how interfaces come to mean what they do, why things work that way, and why this may matter at all. In place of questions on which mode is dominant, then, in this thesis, which looks at reviewing concepts from reception studies across mediated conditions, I ask questions not only about mode, but essentially about medium, about technologies as texts, about implied and ideal readers, about realization of generic devices, and about reception being written into the media itself.

Speaking of the media, it seems that key concepts demands further analysis. In this thesis I attempt a conceptual analysis of three concepts in interpretation – the horizon of expectations, the wandering viewpoint and gap filling. What of texts? While ‘genre’ is a highly theorized concept in screen/literary studies, it begs clear analysis in the context of multimodal/multigeneric mediated communication.

¹⁰ This debate is difficult to accommodate here but it is enough to say that Prior disagrees with the clear-cut divisions between the then and the now that Kress puts forward, amongst other things (Prior, 2005).

Perhaps conceptual clarity, emergent only from empirical work at a trans-genre comparative level, is required to examine the analytical significance of genre in contemporary communications research. An interdisciplinary conceptual frame must be mobilized to compare and contrast media texts and aspects of their reception in distinctive communicative situations, involving analyses at individual and comparative levels. Configurations of text and technology need to be examined in interaction with interpretative acts in a range of mediated conditions. And this is perhaps where the task of audience researchers in the age of the internet is as yet unfinished and even uncertain. Mediated communication in contemporary societies is an amalgamation of multidirectional, multimodal, multimedia and multigenre forms. The blurring of new and pre-existing forms has not been accompanied by a substantial theoretical progress on the format or reception of these newer forms. Theorization of our conceptual toolkits as they exist within literary, film and television studies provides rich resources, but also limits to available conceptual tools with which to make sense of the generic complexities of contemporary media environments, which invite, we are told, new theories of meaning (see Kress, 2003). Audiences and users are coming together, as the agenda of audience research has diversified to span new media use and literacies, but the task of conceptual clarification, conceptual analysis and doubtless, empirical work specifically geared towards conceptual analysis, is lacking. It is this agenda that this thesis seeks to make a contribution to.

Interpretation: between stable legacies and promising possibilities

As will be evident, these questions run through this thesis, with a focus on the interpretative side of the contract of interpretation, introduced in Chapter 3. In reviewing the literature on, if at all, such connections, between communicative conditions, are being imagined, not only within media and communications studies, but more generally, I recently concluded (Das, 2010a) that there is a clearly discernable attempt being made by scholars in a range of disciplines to address these questions. As

audience reception scholars commute from audiences to literacies, both of which share the concept of interpretation, I set out to draw together themes around the changing nature of interpretative work, from six texts that have reflected recently, in very different ways, on interpretation in new media environments. In reviewing a multithreaded conversation across four books from literacy studies, media and communications and user studies, I selected two essays, written at a crucial moment for reception studies, to provide me with a narrative. Speaking from diverse fields, these works suggested a widespread agreement that there is a need to re-think terminologies and concepts from mass-mediated communication in the age of interactive media, not because they no longer prove useful, but because they provide constructive intellectual challenges in thinking through the changing natures of texts and readers, genres and interpretation, literacies and legibilities, as we await new modes every day, for all of these, but also perhaps, new modes of interpretative engagement.

Six texts

So, if the audience reception project connects with the media literacies project via interpretation, what are the conceptual connections between *interpretation* and *use*? Have semantic debates (between *audiences* and *users*) anything useful to contribute to this conversation? In approaching these concerns, an interdisciplinary mapping of themes proves interesting, and this review gets together themes around interpretation/use from four diverse texts, organized at the 'interface' moment, with the help of a narrative provided by two essays. As far as conceptualizing these questions at the interface (Livingstone, 2008a) of texts and readers is concerned, literacy and education studies provides a focus on modes, genres, and more generally on the text, as Gunther Kress's *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003) looks for new theories of meaning in the age of interactive media. Henry Jenkins in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (2006) brings together a selection of trans-media essays that place interpretative work across boundaries of mass and interactive, and along with Tony Wilson's attempts in *Understanding Media Users* (2009) to make Germanic reception aesthetics and North American reader response meet media use, provides a focus

on the dynamic ways in which interpretation is always contextually located and today, shifting from reading to an array of other verbs. Axel Bruns, in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond* (2008), introduces us to the concept of produsage in the world of Web 2.0, by starting from the semantic difficulties with terms like producers and consumers. Bringing these diverse works together, organized at the hermeneutic moment where texts, interpretation and contexts come together to produce meaning, is a task that could be done differently perhaps, in reviewing each text exhaustively, but my purpose is to make them work for the interface concept that situates audiences and literacies beside each other.

Gunther Kress's *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003) blends theories from communication, semiotics, linguistics and literacy to pay close attention to the text, especially genre and mode, in multimodal environments characterized by change and disjuncture. Kress notes the movement away from single modes to multiple modes in our media environments, the visual is noted to be increasingly more important than the verbal, and not merely a question of translating from one mode to another for the written word is no longer the only or the most important mode of communicating (take, for instance, the web page). Kress is ambitious in his desire to repeatedly search for new theories of meaning, a new way in which to theorize a field in flux, where 'the now centuries-long dominance of writing' has given way to the dominance of the image. His questions are, 'where are we? What have we got here? What remains of the old?' (Kress, 2003, p. 8). Different genres are at work here, as he clarifies at the outset, so the world 'narrated' is different from the world 'displayed', the book and writing have given way to the screen and the image where texts are changeable and interpretations feed back into the text, although one may indeed ask, how far? Kress's focus on the separate affordances is crucial: his focus then lies on the prior construction of a *reading path*, on interpretation, at the interface. For Kress, this path in a written text is binding and one cannot go against it in grasping the meaning of the text. Is this problematic for an audience reception theorist? For within communication and cultural studies, the role of interpretation was always to fill gaps (Jauss, 1982) with meaning. Filling gaps involved interpretative

repertoires and textual affordances, and while this is something Kress recognizes, we are reminded of a ‘strict ordering’ which ‘forces’ one to follow the reading path. The ordering of the words in a sentence or a series of sentences is a strict path, the meaning to be derived out of it a different matter altogether. Interestingly, what is *compelling* in the case of the written word is merely *encouraging* in the case of images. For here too, and convincingly enough for the audience scholar, Kress recognizes that reading paths may exist in one of two ways: they are either structured into the image by the author and then read as it is or differentially by the reader, or they are created by the reader even when they were not intended originally by the author. Reading ‘out of order’, which is almost impossible (Kress maintains) in the case of the written word (where writing is the ‘ordering of elements in the conventionalized sequences of syntax’), is at least possible for images (which is the ordering of elements in a more or less conventionalized and spatially simultaneous ‘display’) (Kress, 2003, p. 20).

If genres make us think of legibilities, form and syntax, Tony Wilson pursues the matter of interpreting it all, empirically, from within audience reception studies. In *Understanding New Media Users*, Wilson (2009) takes Germanic reception aesthetics and North American reader response into the heart of research with a wide range of technologies. If we still do not have a repertoire with which to analyse the genres of new media, there is an attendant question. ‘How do we respond to cell phone, film, internet, television screens?’ (Wilson, 2009, p. 7). This is the question that runs through Wilson’s book, but note, to Wilson, response is not simply an individual reaction to a powerful media message ‘out there’, but a culturally patterned hermeneutic moment that produces meaning, and this fast-paced and thought-provoking text positions media engagement as a hermeneutic relationship. He begins with the premise that literacies and engagement with the media are essentially ‘ludic’. So, at the interface of viewers’ and users’ symbolic resources and restraints and the affordances of the technologies themselves, mobile phones are interpreted, in context, websites are navigated as meaning is made at a moment of mutuality. In this task of making reception aesthetics and reader response meet media technologies, Wilson traces the history

of audience reception back to its protest against the dominance of effects scholarship and textual analysis of spectatorship, also envisaging a fruitful conversation between research in cognition and reader response theory, between user studies and literary hermeneutics. Wilson's users are all people who have learnt to interpret the affordances of the mobile phone into their lives, based on what resources they piece together and find meaningful. Users in the book, in interpreting phone numbers flashing on the cell phone screen, in responding to advertisements, or in navigating tourist websites, bring personal resources, symbolic and otherwise, to the hermeneutic moment of interpretation, located in the circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986), where the media is interpreted only, and always from the 'cultural horizons of understanding technology and text' (Wilson, 2009, p. 97). And it is here that contexts provide a 'fore structuring' that patterns expectations and anticipations. And then, texts and their generic legibilities contribute as well, for anticipations and expectations always work within the 'frameworks of comprehending content, categories for classifying consumption of artifacts they know to the point of familiarity' (Wilson, 2009, p. 43), reminding us of audience reception studies' unavoidable relationship with texts and textuality where 'audiences can ensure that stories are completed in ways appropriate to their genre' (p. 61) or that the affordances of a new cell phone prompt our 'ludic looking away from "here" and "now" connecting us "elsewhere"' (p. 79).

In this thesis, from conceptualization through empirical analysis to this concluding mapping of current trends, my biggest resource is the promise of a text-reader analysis rooted in social and cultural resources and restraints. Note that a text-reader analysis is not an instrumental account of individuals making meaning (perhaps what Jenkins (1992) had once called the interpretative acrobatics of texts and readers), but shared interpretative work, that foregrounds the individual as well as the social, restricted necessarily by textual affordances, and this all, in communities of interpretation. The activities of those who 'interpret' digital interactive media are too diverse and too looped to be defined with existing terms such as texts ('out there'), readers (reading and making sense), users (using something, anything, and

letting it be), producers (manufacturing things and sending them out to an unknown mass ‘out there’) and consumers (at the end of the chain, for one, and second, with its own baggage of problems as opposed to *publics*, *citizens* or *people*). In this section I return to semantics, bringing together themes from Henry Jenkins and Axel Bruns who have been theorizing what is increasingly called participatory culture. Jenkins comes from a history of research with mass media audiences, his first piece of research with fans having proved seminal in the direction fan studies have taken since then. He grapples with much, reflexively, in his collated essays in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (2006), starting with a generational account of fan researchers where he tries to position himself meaningfully, and most, his identity as a fan himself, invested in researching other fans. Bruns’s book has a different approach – his starting point is semantic, a dissatisfaction with existing terminology that produces chains, steps and loops which to him are not competent enough for new media environments. Heterarchical, shared, bottom-up, non-linear, collaborative and distributed processes at play in online environments, whether on Second Life, blogs, folksonomies or Wikipedia, necessitate for Bruns, a new term, *produsage*. His perspective, unlike the other works reviewed here, focuses keenly on media systems, media economics, the large-scale operations by innumerable producing individuals in communities, that underlie blogging, online encyclopaedias, photo-sharing sites, citizen journalism and so on. Interpretative engagement, in the produsage model, travels through the book via four key affordances: it is probabilistic, not directed problem solving, it is characterized by equipotentiality and not hierarchy (reversing top-down linear or even looped models from sender to receiver, teacher to learner and so on with, for instance, the Wikipedia mould of open participation and communal evaluation), there are granular not composite tasks (see for instance Bruns’s account of leaving trails in tagging photos online), and content is shared and not owned (so, for instance, the content of mainstream media becomes ‘raw material’ for citizen journalism). Indeed, with reception being gleaned from the text itself (Livingstone, 2004), Bruns, too, notes how ‘content itself changes fundamentally’ (2006, p. 137). And here, for him too, historicizing writing and annotating helps. For him, interpretative discussion and commentary on core texts of yore are akin to pages of discussion today on

collaborative spaces about content and quality. Creativity, when shared, means a collective and collaborative extension of the text, knowledge spaces are shared, and Bruns's terms are interesting: photo-sharing on Flickr is 'collaborative curation'. The book leaves us with a host of new terms for conceptualizing new modes of interpretative engagement, now collective, now inscribed into a text that is fluid, now overturning set orders of hierarchy. Again, how far does this alter real relations of power, as audience ethnographers had once been asked? Or, more importantly, what do we know of lived, contextualized processes of engagement in digital everyday lives?

The two essays I review here – 'The challenge of changing audiences (2004) and 'Engaging with the media: A matter of literacy?' (2008) – both belong to a line of essays¹¹ by Sonia Livingstone on the history and future, of first audiences, and then audiences and users. In terms of focusing on the mass-to-interactive moment these two in particular are constructive for a number of reasons. First, if audience reception research is being repositioned in terms of media and increasingly digital literacies, these essays place this task at the centre of our discussion, connecting mass media audiences (on the research agendas of many in the 1980s and 1990s, and even today) with new media literacies (high on research priorities today). Second, in this task of connecting audiences and literacies, often disconnected domains, for instance, academia and policy, and diverse fields and disciplines, for instance, reception theory and user studies, are constructively linked, thereby getting together a set of discussions which could proceed independent of each other. Third, in outlining challenges for the audience researcher, they offer a historical perspective to both audiences and literacies taking the former into its future by reviewing the instructive potentials of 'old' metaphors in hindsight, and approaching the latter via decade-old debates around its individual and societal purposes. Fourth, one is reminded of the critical purposes to which research with media audiences and media literacies must be put, and the instrumental

¹¹ I include here essays such as *The Rise and Fall of Audience Research* (1993), *Audience Research at Crossroads* (1998), *Relationships between Media and Audiences* (1998), *New Media, New Audiences* (1999), *The Challenge of Changing Audiences* (2004), *The Influence of Personal Influence on the Study of Audiences* (2005), *Taking Audience Research into the Age of New Media* (with Andrea Press) (2006), *Engaging with the Media: A matter of literacy?* (2008) amongst others.

alternatives that could ‘furnish evidence’ for the acquisition of levels of literacy but little else besides. Finally, these books raise questions not only around people’s engagement with the media (in other words, interpretation, literacies and more generally, the notion of activity and agency), but also around the media environment itself (hence the focus on texts, genres and material legibilities).

We are compelled to ask why reception really mattered in the first place, ‘reception’ being the mutuality at the interface of readers and texts, the first always operating in the context of symbolic resources and the latter the site of representation, because in reception the text was not lost in foregrounding the contexts of consumption, but rather retained as an energetically pursued agenda for empirical audience research (see also, Press and Livingstone, 2006). But why is Livingstone’s suggestion of taking the text-reader metaphor forward, instructive? In the essay, her strongest proposal is to recognize that new media texts too need an analysis of their form, structure and content; note, for instance, the lack of consensus on what the genres of digital media are or whether genres are useful conceptual devices for interactive environments in flux. And with content, comes the role of anticipating, expecting and realizing it, borrowing from Germanic reception aesthetics. Livingstone poses critical questions with all of these, contextualizing the role of interpretation for learning and literacy studies, democratic participation, user studies and so on.

‘Engaging with the media: A matter of literacy?’ (2008), four years later, takes this task forward by studying the literacies project and demonstrating four clear ways in which it links with the audiences agenda (Livingstone, 2008, p. 53). These four, it seems, are clearly to do with interpretation, text, context and divergence. The first is active, agentic, and sometimes although not always, resistant. The second places what Umberto Eco would perhaps call ‘limits’ on the first; the second deserves close scrutiny, especially at a time when one believes it to be flighty and elusive. The third is as central to literacies as it was for audiences, hence, for instance, the contributions of ethnographic projects on new literacies,

technologies and learning; and the fourth is often forgotten for research with youthful literacies, where youth are treated as a cohort sharing similar competencies. These four parallels between the audiences agenda and the literacies agenda, highlighted in ‘Engaging with the media: A matter of literacy?’, place the ‘promise of a text-reader analysis’ from ‘The challenge of changing audiences’ in a wider context of the cultures of consumption and use. And in these four it is also possible to envisage a convergence of research around literacies as situated and contextually rooted practices, which, like all practices, have histories, and literacies as divergent interpretative skills that necessarily involve a mutuality of the individual and the societal, without losing sight of either. This essay, like the other, places history at the centre of its concerns in order to illuminate the future. Three ideas in this context are especially instructive. First, Livingstone suggests that literacies and audiences share significant conceptual parallels, identified above, in their shared interests with texts, interpretation, contexts and divergence. Second, she says that literacies, as such, may work better than audiences, in the ‘well populated semantic space’ (2008, p. 54) of contemporary media environments, significantly because of its link to the hermeneutic analysis of texts. The term works better than alternatives such as skills and competencies, which do not do justice to the interpretative space between readers and texts and which lie behind many instrumental pursuits of literacy as skills to be acquired in packages. Third, and I suggest the most crucial observation conceptually and the most instructive methodologically for the mass-interactive moment, is her point that like audiences, literacy too is an *interface concept*, which, in the tradition of reception aesthetics, is ‘theorized as the relation between implied and empirical readers (Iser, 1980) or virtual and actualized texts (Eco, 1979)’ (Livingstone, 2008, p. 55), helpfully focusing our attention on a hermeneutic moment, in the context of diversifying, interactive media environments, where the concept of the text itself deserves close attention.

One of many repertoires

From all this – the debates around audiences, and the perceived end of audiences in the age of the internet – I am about to carry forward a specific set of concepts around the text-reader metaphor into my project with new media users. These concepts are surely not the only set of concepts at the heart of audience research, for the field has converged perspectives from a range of traditions. Allor (1988), who finds *audience* as a term is enmeshed in a complex semantic/discursive field, locates five traditions in the study of audiences – political-economy, post-structuralist film theory, feminist criticism and the reader, cultural studies, post-modernism. Rosengren (1996) also identifies five – British cultural studies, literary criticism, effects research, reception analysis, uses and gratifications – and seeks to know how to get a comprehensive theory of the audience, which for him will come through a combination of techniques, comparison of results and confrontations between theories and methodologies. McQuail identifies three audience research traditions (1997) – the structural, behavioural and the cultural/reception analysis. Convergences between these traditions have been proposed (Livingstone, 1993, 1998, 2006; Schröder for methodological convergence, 1987; Rosengren, 1996; Schröder et al, 2003), and the attempt for convergence opposed by those who maintain there are fundamental dissimilarities between traditions, for instance Curran et al (1982), who find many of these traditions fundamentally opposed, or where scholars within cultural studies (e.g. Ang, 1987) have found calls for convergence, at best paternalistic. A sense of exasperation perhaps runs through the field as we see Barker (1998), for instance, asking where we might go with the individual, for reception theorists, effects scholars, gratifications scholars are all working with the individual (point of convergence) but with different foci and jargon (needs, effects, interpretative communities and so forth – point of divergence).

Any of these many streams could provide a useful set of concepts to carry into the world of the interactive. I select one of these – the literary aesthetics branch of reception analysis. This thesis opened

with a sentence that promised to carry a conceptual repertoire surrounding interpretation from audience reception theory into the age of the internet. This repertoire is located in an interdisciplinary network of concepts in the next chapter. What went in this chapter will then provide a backdrop within which I hope the narrower scope of what follows will find its place. Whether we pursue the feminist agenda in audience research, or the numerous others, it seems certain that the metaphor of the text remains central as does that of the reader to much of what audience studies has pursued, notwithstanding Lull's (1988) critique of the literary bias of the term, or indeed Fiske's (1992) reminder that there are no audiences and texts, but only processes of audiencing. The text-reader metaphor could, in a sense, be traced back to the encoding-decoding (Hall, 1980) of the 1980s. But the concept has another history, often written out of the narrative of audience research. It hails from departments of German literature, and is considered too jargon-laden by some (Hay et al, 1996), too literary by others (e.g. Lull, 1988), or at least, too theoretical and even 'undecipherable' (e.g. Bennett, 1996). Within the European tradition of reception aesthetics, the text-reader metaphor was theorized well to accommodate a range of intriguing concepts, all of which have been at the heart of empirical audience reception studies.

The question I pose in this thesis is, are these concepts usable in any sense in an entirely different communicative condition, and in what ways are they ready for extension and revision? The anticipated value of this question and of the work to researchers of new media, is that it makes available an array of empirical and theoretical work that has gone before in the field of media and communications studies, which they might turn to in theorizing the new media user. The value for the audience researcher is that it draws attention to a range of ways in which their work extends across diverse mediated conditions. In this chapter I attempted to connect audiences and users by providing a fast-paced overview of the history of audience research, identifying debates of significance not only to audience research but also to engagement with the media in general. I moved on to address specific areas – in media literacies research and in conceptual work – with concepts from mass-mediated environments – to trace an attempt to

connect differently mediated communicative conditions. I then reached at a selection of texts, all of which have, in different fields of work, tried to address changing audiences. In the following chapter I move on to exploring this very problem in a conceptually distinct way, as I construct a framework of concepts from a range of different fields that will equip me to enter interviews with users of an online genre.

3. The contract of interpretation

Introduction

Chapter 2 explored how, for audience reception studies, the centrality of interpretation has come to mean an involvement with textual analysis as the site of representation and misrepresentation, the offering of dominant discourses and so forth, it has meant an involvement with the everyday contexts in which interpretation works, thereby forming useful linkages with cultural studies, and it has meant an investigation of the cognitive processes involved in making sense of the media. This has all undoubtedly also meant that audience research has been an arena in which many, from divergent positions, have participated, with differences in purposes. Generations of research have been identified (e.g. Alasuutari, 1999) and disagreed with (e.g. Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), irresolvable rifts apparently stemming from a stark divergence in agendas have both been proposed (e.g. Ang, 1987 writing on administrative and critical research) and converged (see, for example, Livingstone, 1993, reviewing this attempt at convergence).

For research with new media users and their literacies, a focus on interpretation seems to be important in essence even if less apparent discursively in the research literature – what happens at the interface of people and online texts poses questions of relevance to diverse domains. Here, too, there is a focus on the shape of texts, via multimodality research, for instance (e.g. Kress 2003), or on the affordances of technologies (e.g. Hutchby, 2001), although research with content seems scarcer (Livingstone, 2004). The everyday contexts within which literacy practices develop is, like audiences, engaging, although not exactly bringing together those interested in ethnographic pursuits (for perspectives on this see Hine, 2000; Wittel, 2000; Hall and Schultz, 2001; Markham, 2003; Svenigsson, 2002; Carter, 2005; Sade-Beck, 2004), in psychological entries (see, for example, Schiano, 1997; Riva and Galimberti, 2001; Nalwa and

Anand, 2003; Whitty and Carr, 2006; Chen and Peng, 2008; Norman, 2008), and sociological perspectives (see, for instance, Shields, 1996; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wellman et al, 2001; Zhao, 2006; Cavanagh, 2007), and like audiences and their interpretative work, users and their literacies too are of interest to the industry, for very different reasons. Chapter 2 helped us note at least that the text-reader moment has been central to audience reception studies. In this chapter I construct a framework of concepts exploring various aspects of the text-reader metaphor, bringing together perspectives from a range of different fields – I borrow most of my framework from German reception aesthetics to merge it with notions of textual conventions from within semiotics and mix into it perspectives on the affordances of technologies from science and technology. The intention is not to pluck concepts and people out of disconnected fields, but to construct a relationship of mutuality which will inform the empirical analysis presented and a section of which will then be analysed itself.

So, if the compelling conceptual puzzle for this thesis is to work out how far the theoretical repertoire of audience research is useful in the age of the internet, and if the compelling empirical question is to see if this repertoire lets us tackle the significance of divergence in the use of online media – one that makes the audience researcher look for differently realized texts rather than simply different use practices – how might one study some of the important theorizations at work here? In this chapter I outline key concepts from a diversity of fields, propped on a concern with theories of meaning where the intersection of text and reader are of conceptual and empirical interest. Having commenced from a theoretical agenda, and being focused on a set of concepts, which I discuss at length below, two foci for such a theorization, I suggest, are provided in the conceptual puzzle itself. Since audiences and literacies are both concepts of the interface of reader/users and texts/technologies, demanding necessarily a relationship of mutuality, we must first ponder the role of the text as it shapes the making of meaning. Next, we must consider the task of interpretation. Our theoretical resources, identified succinctly within the history of audience reception studies, might then be organized satisfactorily within a theory of the

text and a theory of interpretation. For the former, this chapter distinguishes between work and text, the work being the ‘realized’ text, it elaborates on the idea of textual conventions as evident in the generic shape of the text where conventions open out a possibility to look at the particular provisions of a technology which invite and afford a range of possible uses. For theorising interpretation, which is the dynamic interaction between readers and texts, I adopt perspectives from Continental reception aesthetics and North American reader response criticism, both rooted in literary criticism and both providing an interpretation-focused theory of reading. Together, perspectives on the text, via genre, affordances and openness, and key concepts from reader-oriented theories of meaning, provide the material for a theory-led research design, the operationalization of which is examined in detail in Chapter 4.

De/links

A caveat here – as this thesis will show, transplanting concepts thus, from one moment of mediation to another, carries as many complexities with it as promises. Both become evident in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Fig. 3.1. The interpretative contract and paired concepts of the interface

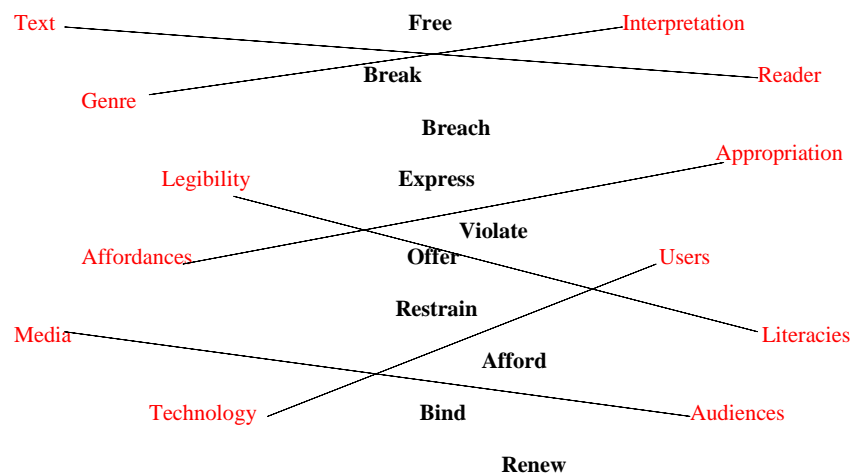


Figure 3.1 explains the rationale for this conceptual framework and brings together concepts from a variety of fields around the interface moment (Livingstone, 2008), between media and audiences, users and technologies, texts and interpretation. This moment is a relationship of mutuality, not to be bounded restrictively within the physical boundaries of the text. The set of words on the left all relate to the text and the set of words on the right all relate to interpretation and inform the methodological decision to research new media use as interpretative work. I carry concepts such as interpretation, reading, genre and other related concepts into the design of a theory-led qualitative interview.

My purpose in using the metaphor of the contract is to suggest the mutual shaping of all these relationships. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, much of the struggles within the empirical pursuit of interpretation had been to do with the balancing of textual shaping and audience agency – over-celebrating the latter often came to mean ignoring the former, and locating meaning solely within the former constructed the latter as implied only, and never really studied. In approaching the interpretative contract thus, it must be clarified at the outset that there are debates of some importance that need to be identified here, attempts to transcend which have, been made, but with varying degrees of success. There are also interesting interdisciplinarity. For instance, in the section below, when I discuss the role of the text as relevant for audience studies, I use the concept of affordances (Hutchby, 2001) within discussions of the text (see Woolgar, 1991 for discussions on technologies as texts) when there seems to be a polarization between the *technology-as-text* and the *affordances of technology* approach as also attempts at convergence. Within discussions of genre, there seems to be a differentiation between genre as textual shape and genre as social process (Kress, 2003), which might perhaps be brought together within audience reception studies. In discussing theories of reading, I indicate disagreements between the Continental and North American traditions (e.g. Fish, 1980), when really both offer us reader-oriented theories of meaning (Livingstone, 1998). Interesting linkages are not few either, with text-interpretation-divergence. Affordances seem to be the language of some psychologists (e.g. Gibson, 1977), sociologists

(Hutchby, 2001) and social semioticians (e.g. Kress, 2003), all of whom throw light on the significance of the 'text' in some form or the other. Interpretation has occupied social scholars of technology (e.g. Woolgar, 1991), literary theorists (e.g. Iser, 1970; 1974; 1978; Jauss, 1982) and cultural researchers (e.g. Radway, 1984), and there is a shared language between implied readers (Iser, 1978), implied audiences (Livingstone, 1998) and implied users (Woolgar, 1991). Some of these debates and linkages are too tangential to explore in this chapter; some are of central importance.

Thinking about meaning, two ideas seem significant. (Das, 2011: forthcoming). First, the idea of the text, perhaps positioned usefully with the concept of genre with its conventions, structure and legibilities now shared and blurred between authors, readers, writers, users, even producers (Bruns, 2008). Second, the idea of interpretation, once comfortably called 'reading', and now challenged in the face of more visibly 'active' use that physically alters textual form and shape. The mutuality between readers and texts has long been captured within Germanic reception aesthetics (see Iser, 1978; Jauss, 1982), and then retained within audience reception studies with its repertoire of intertextuality, tertiary texts (Fiske, 1988), the wandering viewpoint (Iser, 1978), horizons of expectation (Jauss, 1982) and contextually located interpretations specific to media genre (e.g. Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985). Later, these continue to be recognized within research with new media users and their literacies, where, as Livingstone (2008, citing Fornas et al, 2002) points out, users passing through digital texts and reception and literacies are both said to signify a 'necessarily mutual connection between interpreter and that which is interpreted' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 55).

The school of literary criticism from which I borrow most of my concepts is largely known as reader-response criticism. Freund, in her account of the many diverse streams within reader-response studies says that "by re-focusing attention on the reader, reader-response criticism attempts to grapple with questions generally ignored by schools of criticism which teach us how to read; questions such as why

do we read and what are the deepest sources of our engagement with literature?” (1987, p 5). She goes on to note that a “by-product of these investigations is a renewed attention to the different aspects and implications – rhetorical, political, cultural, psychological etc. – of critical style” (p 6).

Reader-response criticism, in Freund’s words is “a labyrinth of converging and sometimes contradictory approaches.” (1987, p 6). These include amongst others the “changing landmarks of phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, rhetoric, psychoanalysis, transactive criticism, subjective criticism, feminism, psychoaesthetics, deconstruction, gnostic revisionism, and other critical and philosophical persuasions” (1987, p 7). Suleiman and Crossman (1980) identify six broad streams - rhetorical, semiotic and structuralist, phenomenological, subjective and psychological, historical and sociological, and hermeneutic. Tompkins in her 1980 account of reader response criticism says it began originally from a highly formalist, text-centred position. Gibson’s mock reader for instance is not in any sense a real reader and for Gibson meaning is contained within the text. This mock reader then is a property of the text. (Tompkins, 1980) Freund notes the seeds of reader response within the highly text centred approach of new criticism – 1930s to 1950s, where new criticism rejected the reader, marginalised the reader. It emphasized the critic’s job – to interpret text. But what about the various conditions of comprehension of the text? And thus, as Holub (1984) notes, “the turn to reception theory as a possible resolution to the crisis in literary methodology [...] is one of the most important aspects of this shift in scholarly emphasis” (1987, p 9)

Beginning to take forward the focus on comprehension came Jonathan Culler’s theory of reading, which had precursors in Riffaterre’s positioning of the ‘super-reader’ (Riffaterre, 1966). The super-reader as Freund puts it refers to the “system of intertextuality whose relevance to the understanding of the poem must be incorporated into its analysis” (1987, p 76) Later Riffaterre was known to abandon the super-reader for the controlling of reading by signs in the text. (Riffaterre, 1966) The main aspect of Culler’s

work is the question of competence – the speaker of language and the author of a text has a range of competences as their disposal, and so does the reader know how to interpret. Culler’s critique of reader-response theories is the focus on immediate response being accessible. What we are offered is a telling of the story of interpretation. Another critic who swerved away from New Criticism was Stanley Fish. He claimed a sentence to be an event, something that happens with the participation of the reader. By interpretative communities Fish did not indicate a group of people but a collection of norms and strategies held together in common. Freund interprets this to be a statement that our strategies and habits of interpretation are not individual and unique but held in common. As Freund puts it (1987), reader response criticism can be grouped into two broad divisions – the ‘positive’ or happy camp, with the likes of Iser, where the reader overcomes obstacles and the alternative camp where the reader is manipulated by an uncanny text, and where there is frustration, misreading and so on.

Unlike American reader response criticism, which I have only briefly indicated, German reception aesthetics grew within a group of scholars at Konstanz all of whom shared a common set of ideas. One of its differences with reader response is the shift of focus from response to the text (in the American tradition) to the judgment of the reader (reception). So, as Iser points out *rezeptionsaesthetik* indicates an emphasis on reception and *wirkungsaesthetik* emphasizes the potential effect of the text. Other differences remain. Holub (1984) notes that American reader-response theorists have had limited interactions and “these theorists are not participating in any critical movement, and they are apparently responding with their methods to quite different predecessors and circumstances” (p xiii). Continental reception theory, as I have just noted, grew out of the work of the Konstanz school in Germany and was a mindful, cooperative undertaking. Holub also notes that with the exception of Iser (who has been influential in both camps and hence also who is someone I follow in representing reader-response as well as reception aesthetics both) there has been limited interaction between the camps. Iser’s work encountered strong criticism from Stanley Fish, centring around the issue of indeterminacy. For Fish, the text was never a

given, and any such ‘given’ was already the result of interpretation. Iser on the other hand claims that something at least is determinately given. “For Fish, nothing is given, and the reader supplies everything” (p 149) Freund calls this the difference between Iser’s dualism (where both text and reader matter) and Fish’s monism (where the text disappears). As Holub puts it, Iser “agrees with Fish’s contention that there is no unmediated given, but maintains nevertheless that there is “something” that restricts interpretation” (Holub, 1984, p 103). Thus, what the German school provides is a statement of the text as well as the reader, where neither side is privileged, there are gaps within the text which demand filling and there is work to be done by the reader in filling those gaps. So – I focus particularly on the German school of reception aesthetics, although as I noted there are others who have hailed from French structuralism (Jonathan Culler), American rhetorical and stylistic criticism (Stanley Fish) or Freudian psychoanalysis (Norman Holland). These works all share what one might call a ‘recurrent plot’ – a ‘dissatisfaction with formalist principles, and a recognition that the practice of supposedly impersonal and disinterested reading is never innocent” (Freund, 1980, p 10)

Theories of meaning – textual considerations

A focus on ‘text’ helps draw our attention to questions of syntactics and semantics, content and shape, where audiences expect, anticipate and interpret differently for different audiovisual genres. While all this speaks of stability in generic form, where one could flag ‘new’ formats such as reality TV or other genres as ‘hybrid’ because they challenged conventional definitions of openness and closure (Eco, 1979), the interactive text starts from blurred boundaries and decreased stability. Today, online content emerges with largely unclear terms (Peters, 2009), engaging users in transactional interactions (Leu and Donald, 2000), reminding one of the mutuality in the relationship between readers and texts, at the interface moment. Thus, videogame texts are semiotic domains (Gee, 2006) where literacies develop, or one reads laterally across multiple modes and spaces in IM (instant messaging) environments (Lewis and Fabos, 2005), and long before the advent of Web 2.0, in the early days of hypertext, literacies meant the

four interlocking practices of breaking the code of texts, participating in the meanings of texts, using texts functionally and critically analysing and transforming texts (Freebody and Luke, 1990). Focusing on the concept of the text one finds parallel notions of legibilities and affordances, the first drawing attention to the potential limits placed on interpretation by an illegible or manipulative text, and the second identifying resources as well as restraints that the text/technology affords.

The work and the text

If the text represents a moment of encoding specific norms, even if multiply and continuously authored, the ‘work’ we are told by Wolfgang Iser (1978), is different from the text, for it brings to the moment of encoding the possibilities opened up by the interpretative act of decoding. How far and in what ways is the work more than the text, or to what extent can interpretation extend and alter the text restrained by the possibilities made available by the text? While the work might take the text into territories not quite intended to exist in the creation of the text, textual conventions, technological affordances (discussed below) and the openness or closure (Eco, 1979) of the text shape the work. Reader-oriented theories of meaning, in their Continental form as well as their North American form, try to capture the process of interpretation, thereby also outlining textual features that limit or resource the act of reading. In this sub-section I make reference to Wolfgang Iser’s distinction between the work and the text. First, drawing from the phenomenological theory of art, Iser stresses that a text (he speaks of the literary text) is the actual text and in equal measure, the ‘actions involved in responding to the text’ (p. 274). Ingarden (1968, cited in Iser, 1974) refers to this as *konkretisation*, that is, bringing the text to light, and Iser concludes that the final ‘work’ is neither identical with the text, nor with the realization of the text, but lies in between. Hence,

...the work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different *patterns of the text*. (Iser, 1974, pp 274-5; emphasis added)

Note the striking similarities with the idea of generic conventions, as well as with the idea of affordances as discussed below.

For Iser, it is only the ‘convergence of text and reader’ which brings the work (not the text) into existence. This, for Iser, is largely a heuristic, for he doubts if ever one can empirically capture this convergence. The largely theoretical approach to reader-oriented theories of meaning is perhaps more representative of the Continental tradition of reception aesthetics than the North American tradition of reader-response, something I discuss later when writing about theories of interpretation. In what follows I highlight some of Iser’s perspectives on the work and the text, which, when carried into the age of Web 2.0, provides a horizon of possibilities and even complexities.

First, the work (which for Iser, is virtual) is neither to be identified with the reality of the text nor with the individual disposition of the reader. Second, the text does offer a range of perspectives and patterns. These are set in motion in the act of reading. Note that these patterns do indeed exist, and presumably shape what is set in motion. Third, in transforming text to work through the act of reading, there must be involved a process of creativity for reading to be pleasurable. Note that Iser’s creativity was conceptualized for texts in print; today, creativity is physically apparent in the interpretation of online texts. Fourth, the text presents boundaries. Iser says that the ‘text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play’ (1974, p 175). Note here, the possibilities on engagement and disengagement

presented by textual worlds across media environments. Fifth, readings involve expectations of texts. According to Iser, ‘the more a text individualises or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose’ (p. 278). This brings us interestingly close to the idea of critical literacy, where the empirical question really is how aware users are of didactic purposes, or indeed their own expectations, and how far these diverge. Sixth, the work represents a multiplicity of connections which are absent in the text but are formed in reading. Finally, in even the simplest story (note that this was being written for literary texts) there are unavoidable omissions, twists and turns, and thus, ‘whenever the flow is interrupted (in the text) and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself’ (p. 280).

Iser, in reviewing reader response criticism, points out that the text, in order to be examined, must be seen through the eyes of the reader. In *Prospecting: From reader-response to literary anthropology*, Iser (1993) maintains that the more texts lose their determinacy, the more the reader is pushed into the range of possible interpretations they can make. Gaps that are opened up with increasing indeterminacy permit the reader to build their own bridges and make their own connections. If, however, indeterminacy exceeds the reader’s expectations, they feel overburdened. But Iser also points that indeterminacy can be counterbalanced at any time, depending on the experiences of the reader. ‘On the other hand, a text may conceivably contradict our preconceptions to such a degree that it calls forth drastic reactions such as throwing a book away’ (p. 8), an observation of some interest when making sense of disengagement with genres, something I tackle in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Thus the work is different from the text for it represents an addition to and an activation of sorts, of the patterns, possibilities, gaps and twists undeniably held in the text. The text perhaps affords the work,

resources and limits it in diverse ways. This all invites us to think carefully about these patterns and possibilities and the conventions that cause them to be the way they are. Genre is one such concept that draws our attention to textual norms and conventions.

Conventions and the anticipation of roles in reading

Livingstone and Lunt, in discussing the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, in Goffman's (1981) participation framework, highlight the mutuality in the relationship by defining the framework thus:

...the perceived rights of the variously arranged participants to affect the course of the communication, their responsibilities to act in certain ways and according to certain evaluative and epistemological criteria, the overall gratifications which are to be achieved, and the nature of the social process of which this event is one part. (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p. 54)

Two points emerge from this. First, that there exists an anticipation of roles and responsibilities in any moment of communication and second, that this moment of communication is consistently in context, and hence a part of many others. Thinking of the communicative moment between text and reader, these perhaps bring us close to the idea of conventions and intertextuality in the construction of texts. With conventions, one might mean the normalization of specific patterns in a specific type of text – hence, simplifying this discussion we have different expectations when we are a soap opera viewer than when we are a horror film audience. These conventions, like all conventions, have histories, including some and excluding others. With intertextuality – a concept not readily accepted by all (see Kress, 2001) – we note that the patterns of the text are never born in isolation, but are pieced together from what might have gone before.

For Gunther Kress (2003), unpacking the idea of text means distinguishing clearly between three of its aspects – genre, discourse and mode. The third refers to the mono or multimodal (verbal, visual, and so forth) nature of the text; the second refers to the issues/content carried in the text (for which, in media and communications studies we have developed our methods of content and discourse analysis); and by genre, Kress indicates the shape of the text. This shape is the result of social action. Note here that what is of empirical interest to this thesis is the interpretation of a specific textual shape, and an unpicking of its patterns and offering rather than the social action that has gone behind the construction of the text. Kress's discussion of genre is marked by its emphasis on convention, this being a point I shall return to later in the empirical chapters of this thesis. So, Kress says:

It is entirely conventional and recognisable, that is, it is a text with recognisable and oft repeated structure, with a particular way of expressing (coding) social relationships. [...] The conventionalized aspect of this interaction is what we recognize as being generic, as making of this text a particular genre. (Kress, 1993, p. 24)

This point with the 'conventionalization' of norms is their becoming seemingly 'natural'. It is in becoming natural and 'normal' that genres exclude those who come with different symbolic resources, including psychosocial and cultural ones, than the ones within which these genres developed. The stability of these conventions, for Kress, is not be decided easily, for there will be degrees to which these conventions will be un/stable. Is there an uneasy tension between the recognizability and hence the stability of these generic conventions and the argument, on the other hand, that these conventions might be entirely unstable if the social givens to which the genre is a response change? Kress argues that this is not really the case, for the real question is 'where are the recognisable similarities, and the recognisable differences, and what do they reveal' (1993, p. 97)?

This moves genre away from being simply a typification of texts, towards the mutually negotiated moment between encoding the conventions of the text, and also decoding it. The decoding aspect of interpretation is touched on later, but the moment of encoding which gives birth to a genre provides us a category of text that, according to Kress (2003), realizes three types of social relations – those of the actors, objects and events reported in the account, those of the participants in the act of communications implied by the account, and the social world represented by the account.

And thus texts are born in a continuous weaving together of relations, rather than in an *a priori*, fixed, blueprint-directed mechanism (Kress, 2001), where all texts, as they travel out in interpretations, conversations and so forth, are in a sense endless. The physical boundaries of the text, then, are punctuations in a process of endless semiosis (Kress, 2001).

From conventions to affordances

Iser's focus on patterns and possibilities in the text, prior to its becoming a work, and Kress's focus on the norms and conventions that give birth to genres, brings us close to a parallel conversation, happening elsewhere, away from departments of literary theory, where scholars of sociology, science and technology speak of and indeed, disagree on, the idea of *affordances*, which, following Hutchby (2001), refers to the 'constraining as well as enabling materiality of artefacts' (p. 441). Perhaps 'affordances of the text' is a phrase with which some will disagree, primarily because those who speak of technology as text and those who speak of affordances of technology do not necessarily agree on the text metaphor. Affordances have entered the parlance of science and technology studies from the psychology of perception, following Gibson (1979). With time, however, it seems to have crystallized into a debate that appears more polarized than is necessary. On the one hand, it seems, are the anti-essentialists (see Grint and Woolgar, 1997; Rappert, 2001), who maintain that a technology is a text – open to interpretation –

and it is only on interpretation (active, resistant, contextualized) that the text becomes activated, as Iser might put it, or realized, as Eco says. Another position, not technologically deterministic, but one that puts forward the technological shaping of society, however, is visible from within sociology (e.g. Hutchby, 2001), where the properties of a technology constrain in 'analysable ways the range of affordances that particular artefacts possess' (Hutchby, 2001, p. 453). These ways being ones that constrain interpretations and uses, allow us, Hutchby says, to move beyond the restrictions imposed by the technology as text metaphor. Interestingly, however, it seems that the technology as text metaphor incorporates a recognition of these affordances, perhaps in an alternative, in the reception theory-derived language of readers and writers. While reading and interpretation could be (and indeed have been) wrongly extended to mean limitless polysemy, interpretation that fills gaps (Jauss, 1982) necessarily recognizes that there is, first, a text which needs to be interpreted, and second, that there are gaps in it that need filling. In user studies, Woolgar et al (1998, pp, 580, 581) puts it thus: 'certain features of the structure and design of the artefact make certain interpretations and uses more likely than others. By way of textual analysis one can discern, in particular, which sorts of readers are implied by the text'. And hence 'notions about the ideal user tend to get built into the design of a technical artefact' (p. 581). Implied users/readers makes it necessary for both audiences and user researchers to inquire into how technologies position certain actions/readings to be favoured over others.

So, in the technology as text metaphor, perhaps there is an unarticulated recognition of that which is allowed by the text, through the use of the implied user. And, in discussing affordances, perhaps Hutchby recognises the possibilities of engaging with the limits set by affordances when he points out that what we make of technology is in fact 'accomplished in the interface between human aims and the artefact's affordances' (2001, p. 453). By investigating the relationship between encoding and decoding, or virtual and realized text, or sign and interpretant, one may ask the question: how are meanings produced and reproduced? In today's task of meaning production, users operating in a peer to peer

environment are often highly collaborative, even undertaking the physical alteration of the texts themselves, thus reshaping the media environment experienced by others. Note that the language of conventions and constraints in this context is strikingly similar to the discussions of genre, where generic norms and conventions were of importance in the process of meaning making (Kress, 2003).

Openness and closure

Overall there seems to be an agreement that, there is something in the design of the text that makes available invitations, offers, resources and restraints. Literary theorists would call it the uninterpreted text, or would speak of gaps in the text; the anti-essentialist view within science and technology studies would speak of implied users which are built into the structure of a text (Woolgar, 1991); and affordances indicate that the technology makes available a certain set of resources and restraints which are then interpreted in use. An interesting pair of concepts that brings these possibilities and limits together is openness and closure (Eco, 1979). Closer perhaps to the technology as text metaphor that Grint and Woolgar propose (1997), for Eco, texts are produced through the process of reading. While recognising that most (fictional) texts fall in between what he calls open texts and closed texts, Eco too accommodates the fact that texts do indeed make certain readings more available than others. He says ‘an open text cannot be described as a communicative strategy if the role of its addressee (the reader, in the case of verbal texts) has not been envisaged at the moment of its generation qua text. An open text is a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantico pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process’ (Eco, 1979, p. 3). Interestingly close to the concept of affordances, on the other hand (where, Hutchby reminds us that interpretations are possible, but not endlessly), Eco, in discussing *Les Chats*, says it is enough to assume that the text ‘not only calls for the cooperation of its own reader, but also wants this reader to make a series of interpretative choices which even though not infinite, are, however, more than one’ (1979, p. 3).

I bring a discussion of openness and closure into this conversation, even though I shall not undertake a textual analysis in this thesis, primarily because an awareness of intentional closing down or opening up of the text is important to keep in mind when listening to readers discussing their perceptions of authorship and authorial power, something I return to in my empirical chapters. Because the open text and the closed text differ markedly in their communicative strategies, it is interesting to note how interpretations differ from this intended communicative strategy as well. So, when Iser for instance speaks of the work as the realised text, an awareness of the strategy behind the text in the first place helps us pay attention to the kind of activity that has gone into pushing textual possibilities in a range of different directions. It is here that the twin concepts of openness and closure tie in with the other, primarily interpretation-oriented concepts to be discussed in what follows. Doubtless of course, a textual analysis for openness and closure would reveal textual intricacies not revealed in this thesis, see for example, Livingstone's analysis of three popular British soaps (Livingstone, 1998) in terms of openness and closure, leading her to assert that the soap is essentially an open text.

In other words, open texts are created with the deliberate intention of a multiplicity of possible readings, whereby the author has imagined a variety of interpretative positions. Closed texts, on the other hand, are created with the image of a very specific reader in mind, aiming to 'pull the reader along a predetermined path' (Eco, 1979, p. 8). Eco writes on how a text produces a model reader, that authoring texts essentially involves a series of pre-thought codes. 'To organise a text, its author has to reply upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter the Model reader)' (1979, p. 7). Thus, every text selects a very general model of possible reader through the choice (i) of a specific linguistic code, (ii) of a certain literary style, and (iii) of specific specialization indices. '[A]

text beginning with/According to the last developments of the TeSWeST.../immediately excludes any reader who does not know the technical jargon of text semiotics' (Eco, 1979, p. 7).

Texts differ in their degrees of openness and closure. For Eco, 'those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers [...] are in fact open to any possible "aberrant" decoding. A text so immoderately "open" to every possible interpretation will be called a closed one' (1979, p. 8).

He refers to Superman's comic strips or Fleming's novels as belonging to this category. These texts have been built anticipating the responses of the ideal reader who is 'able to master different codes and eager to deal with the text as with a maze of many issues. But in the last analysis what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze-like structure of the text. You cannot use the text as you want it, but only as the text wants you to use it' (1979, p. 9).

An open text, on the other hand, is built imagining a diversity of possible responses, but interestingly enough, 'however "open" it may be, it cannot afford whatever interpretation' (1979, p. 9), for 'An open text outlines a "closed" project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy' (1979, p. 9). The conclusion is perhaps that texts that are closed may result in more divergent and unanticipated interpretations for the simple reason that it has not been built to anticipate diversity. Open texts, seemingly open for interpretative divergence, may then end up offering a potentially lesser number of alternatives. Earlier I introduced the use of the concept of indeterminacy following Iser. Livingstone (1990) outlines how differentiating between openness and indeterminacy is tricky.

Certainly, there are theoretical and practical problems in distinguishing openness from indeterminacy unless one invokes the concept of authorial intention. For mass culture texts,

authorial intention is especially hard to specify. [...] To treat openness and indeterminacy as synonymous is to lose the possibility of an author who intends openness (and structures the text to ensure multiple readings) and hence also the possibility that divergence indicates communicative success on the part of the text. (Livingstone, 1990, p. 42)

Theorizing the role of the text thus draws our attention to conventions, norms, possibilities, gaps, omissions, textual strategies, coding and overcoding, and one half of the interactive relationship in meaning making is visible. Interpretation completes the task of making meaning.

Theories of meaning – the act of interpretation

For both mass and interactive media, texts ‘initiate “performances” of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves’ (Iser, 1978, p. 27) as the reader participates actively in meaning making. This bond of hermeneutic engagement is theorized well with the concept of the interpretative contract where meaning must lie in a relationship of mutuality and transactions between the text and reader, technology and user.

The interpretative contract

The interpretative contract demands, in the digital world, a complex set of literacies including not only the verbal but also visual and audiovisual literacies (Snyder and Beavis, 2004). In the contract, texts are encountered promiscuously: in interpretation, they overlap, co-exist, and pour in from diverse media, in differently paced flows, mixing public and private forms (Johnson, 1986). So, as Livingstone (2008) reminds us, both audiences and literacies remain centred round a focus on interpretation, following the text-reader moment from the Germanic tradition of reception aesthetics. In Table 3.1 below, some of

these pairings are identified (and note the interdisciplinarity involved). Each represents a relationship, and most of these are either theoretically or empirically recognized as ones of co-construction and mutual shaping.

Table 3.2. Interpretative contract: paired concepts

Text dimension	Reader dimension	Fields of research (examples)	Relationships of co-construction	Significance
Stimulus	Response	Psychology	Co-construction largely ignored in treating the text as stimulus. Context ignored in empirical research and interpretation treated as response	The passive and often contextually disconnected individual responds to external stimuli, the possibility of divergence being discarded as error is high, and conclusive ways forward for researching media effects are limited
Text	Spectator/reader	Reception theory, screen studies	Text empirically researched but spectator/reader theorized rather than empirically pursued	Moving away from stimulus to text opens up micro-level spaces for interpretative work as texts are symbolic representations open varying to interpretations. However ideal readers/spectators can do little for understanding macro relations
Genre	Interpretation	Reception aesthetics, social semiotics, literacy studies, media and communications	Both theorized and to an extent empirically pursued. Genre approached as both textual shape as well as social process	Genre as process represents the mutual understanding enacted through the encoding/decoding moments. And as a textual shape it is in some sense reified as a material form
Media	Audiences (Audiences as <i>publics, citizens, consumers, users, producers</i>)	Media and communications	Theorized via diverse disciplinary approaches and empirically researched, taking into account both text and context in interpretative divergence	Micro accounts of individual interpretative freedom, divergence and/or resistance lead to macro questions of participation, power, politics, production systems, structure and agency
Legibility	Literacy	Literacy and education studies	Texts and reading implied in the concept of literacy but the literature on literacy as dependent on the legibility of texts is still largely analytic	Reading a text links with reading society and the world at large – divergent critical literacies of individuals position them differently as publics, citizens and consumers and legibility brings into focus the question of manipulative/discriminatory and persuasive texts

Affordances	Appropriation	Science and technology studies	Co-construction acknowledged via social construction of technology, actor-network theory, cultural studies and so forth	Technologies involve both an anticipation of an ideal user and are shaped by the resources of the real user. Large-scale networked systems of participation involve the cross-cutting co-construction between bottom-up, heterogeneous and horizontal forms of engagement
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For an audience researcher focused on interpretative work, three things happen at the interface moment, within the interpretative contract: first, encoding itself imagines an ideal reader, conventions (the shapes that are taken by norms within contexts) become recognizable, in becoming recognizable, they are worked out through interpretation (that is, literacies), the latter being divergent for a variety of reasons.

The text anticipates, or presupposes, a competence in the reader and, at the same time constructs that competence through the process of reading. [...] The “model reader” is discoverable by analysing the textual codes of stereotyped overcoding, co-reference, rhetoric, inference, frames, and genre. [...] Textual analyses should thus reveal the “role of the reader”, or the demands which the text places on the reader in order for it to make sense. (Livingstone, 1992, p. 5)

Can the interpretative contract be offered as a fruitful convergence of textual shape (form, design, structure, convention, legibility) and process (interpretative realization)? The contract itself embodies a circular relationship of legibilities and literacies may even produce windows out of these that lead into wider questions – legibilities offering an in-road into the media itself, and literacies an in-road into the lived practices of interpretation. In this project, my specific focus lies on the grammar, formal structure, organization of the shape of an emergent text, and then children’s diverse activities to make sense of it. Note here that these are all questions about shape and formal structures, but are largely processual in nature: contracts, implied readers, the construction and normalization of conventions are all processes

knotted within the complex processes of encoding and decoding. It seems as clear now as it seemed in the context of mass media that we must study actual interpretations as a function of the mode of interaction with the text, this mode of interaction being itself influenced by the conventions of the genre (Livingstone, 1992, p. 5). As the research presented in this thesis shows, critical literacies, implicitly and explicitly, involve guessing potential manipulations and authorial persuasion, and selecting, with creative agency, textual elements that speak (or not) to the user. So, if the conventions of the genre have been anticipated as being manipulative, recognized as being persuasive, expected to intersperse ‘friend feeds’ with adverts, users with advanced literacies may even resist textual manipulation. But embedded in conventions are also the limits posed by legibility, and hence, the value of the ‘contract’ – it affords a relationship of mutuality between resources/restraints in the text and the interpretative work of the user.

A reader-oriented position

Literary criticism often continues to follow a text-oriented approach to meaning, and brings problems faced by those who do content or discourse analysis within communications studies, for instance. The notion of a mock reader was introduced by Gibson (1950), where ‘the mock reader implied by a text gives the reader’s experience its shape and valorizes that experience as an object of critical attention’ (Tompkins, 1980, p. xi). Later, the reader was fully established theoretically, within what is called reader-oriented theories of meaning. This includes the largely North American tradition of reader-response criticism and the largely Continental tradition of reception aesthetics. It is important perhaps to indicate towards an exchange between reader response critics and reception theorists. In this thesis, I bring together two scholars from the Continental tradition: Wolfgang Iser (whose perspectives on the work and the text have been discussed), and Hans Robert Jauss, both from the German tradition of reception theory. In discussing Iser’s contributions, Stanley Fish, writing from within the North American reader response tradition, comments:

To the question informing much of contemporary literary theory – what is the source of interpretative authority, the text or the reader – Iser answers “both.” He does not, however, conceive of the relationship between them as a partnership in which each brings a portion of the meaning which is then added to the portion brought by the other; for in his theory meaning is something neither of them has (it is not an embodied object); rather it is something that is produced or built up or assembled by a process of interaction in which the two parties play quite different, but interdependent, roles. (Fish, 1980, p. 1)

The consensus within reception theory is that meaning is produced at the interface of texts and readers, the final product being quite different from either the individual idiosyncrasies of the reader or the structure of and the meaning authored into the text. The dissatisfaction this generates (evidenced in Lull’s 1988 critique or even Bennett’s 1996 response to Lull, discussed in the previous chapter) is the largely theoretical nature of the endeavour within reception aesthetics where the reader is always studied through the text and not empirically. This is also linked to a note of disagreement between the American and Continental branches of reception theory. In an exchange between Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser, in the pages of *Diacritics*, back in the early 1980s (Iser et al, 1980), the two attempted to bring together the differences in the way reception theory had evolved in the Anglo-American and the Continental traditions respectively. Holland argues for a more deductive approach to reading while Iser argues for an inductive one. Holland is uncomfortable with Iser’s implied reader and cannot understand Iser’s distinction between *Rezeptionstheorie* (a theory of reception) and *Wirkungstheorie* (a theory of effects), the former being what Iser proposed: an essentially heuristic, analytical frame of the interaction of the reader with textual structure, which leaves Holland dissatisfied in its neglect of ‘real’ readers. Iser disagrees, however, in starting with readings and argues that he needs a theory in place before ‘real’ responses, which to him, perhaps, bear traces of an overtly psychological entry into the reading process.

As outlined earlier also, Iser's focus was on the mutuality of the text-reader relationship whereas Fish's focus was on the act of reading to the extent of disagreeing that the text exists as a 'given' at all.

Expectations, anticipations, retrospection, consistency and horizons

Earlier I outlined Iser's focus on expectations involved in the act of reading where, 'the more a text individualises or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose' (1974, p. 278). Next, Iser says that the task of interpretation presents a 'kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections. Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the "preview" and so becomes a "viewfinder" for what has been read' (p. 279). This, for Iser, is a process that involves both anticipation and retrospection. For literary texts (though, as with all the concepts discussed in this chapter, this too is interesting to apply for non-fictional and non-linear texts), the act of reading is selective and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations. Note that in saying this, Iser does not intend to bring us back to authorial intention by saying that there is an original meaning of the text which is infinitely richer, but rather that a range of potential interpretations is possible. Whether that is infinite, is worthy of some debate.

The fourth aspect Iser draws attention to, after expectations, anticipations and retrospection, is consistency building. 'While expectations may be continually modified, and images continually expanded, the reader will still strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern' (p. 283). Consistency is crucial for engagement with the text to continue. If sense cannot be made, even with the act of reading, and if consistency cannot be built, eventually the reader will leave the text. For Iser, this process is 'virtually hermeneutic' (p. 285) and we must note that these consistencies are potentially divergent across real readers.

Interestingly, consistency building is punctuated by moments of doubt. ‘As we work out a consistent pattern in the text, we will find our “interpretation” threatened, as it were, by the presence of other possibilities of “interpretation”, and so there arise new areas of indeterminacy’ (Iser, 1974 p. 287). More intriguingly, sometimes, it is these interruptions, which for Iser render the act of recreation (where the reader creates their own experience) makes reading an efficacious process.

We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. This process is steered by two main structural components within the text: first a repertoire of familiar (literary) patterns and recurrent (literary) themes [...]; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar. (Iser, 1974, p. 289)

Hans Robert Jauss, who approaches reception theory from a more historical point of view, feels the aesthetic value of a text is passed on through time, and that the ‘aesthetic’ component comes from the first reading of the text that involves a comparison of this text to others. He introduces the concept of *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations) which are contributed to by the norms of the genre, contemporary familiar literary-historical surroundings (perhaps, in essence, comparing the text to other comparable ones) and for literary texts, the difference between fiction and reality. By doing this Jauss wishes to avoid an overtly psychological entry into the reading process, something he shares with Iser. While Iser draws on the phenomenological theories of art, Jauss adopts a consciously socio-historical approach. Holub identifies, however, that despite this desire to ‘escape’ certain approaches, Jauss returns to what he apparently wishes to avoid. ‘As long he insists on the possibility of a reconstruction of the horizon of expectations and sets out to accomplish this reconstruction with evidence or signals from the works themselves he is going to be measuring the effect or impact of works against a horizon that is abstracted from those works’ (Holub, 1984, p. 62). Iser discusses a different notion of horizons thus,

when discussing chapters in a literary text. 'Each chapter prepares the "horizon" for the next, and it is the process of reading that provides the continual overlapping and interweaving of the views presented (by each of the chapters). The reader is stimulated into filling the "empty spaces" between the chapters in order to group them into a coherent whole' (Iser, 1974, p. 226).

Conclusion

The text-reader metaphor has received a range of critiques, some of which can perhaps also be extended to reception aesthetics. Later I critique my own position in adopting the language of texts and readers but for the moment I will draw attention to some critiques of reception aesthetics in general. In an excellent discussion of Iser's work, Fluck (2000) notes how Holub (1984) criticised Iser's reader to be a-contextualised in a sense, or worse, always a "competent and cultured reader" (Holub, 1980, p 97). In this thesis, we shall note in the empirical chapters how diverse my 'readers' are and how divergent their contexts are for that matter. Iser's theory of the reader and the text, or the text-reader metaphor which was largely a theoretical concept within literary theory became a much more empirical, and by extension contextualised concept as it entered audience reception studies, especially within cultural studies and it is that extension that I have pursued in this thesis rather than a theoretical exposition of the metaphor itself. Fluck goes on to note Tompkins's (1980) critique that this discussion of texts and readers has not really moved away from the formalism of New Criticism which I had previously noted, and still in some sense persisted in essentialising the text and a reader, who as we know, at least within literary aesthetics has not been empirically pursued. These critiques link in well with a more general critique advanced by Eagleton for instance (1983) that reader-response criticism provided an escape from politics into the intricacies of phenomenology. And so, as Fluck notes (2000) while 'critical literary theory' became more fashionable in departments of literature, reader-response soon got elbowed out. It is this last that I shall attempt to address in this thesis, in the empirical chapters especially where I try to show how

interpretation is socio-culturally resourced, restrained and contextualised (Chapter 5), how readings produce divergent perceptions of an author and by extension authorial power (Chapter 6) and how the task of interpretation necessitates a range of critical competencies including significant acts of refusal and resistance (Chapter 7). Jauss's work too has been heavily criticised. His notion of the horizon of expectations, which I shall analyse later in this thesis, refers to a range of experiences of the reader which are mobilised to judge a piece of work. But Holub (1984) notices key difficulties in employing the term. Holub notes that the "method he indicates for objectifying the category (of the horizon) presupposes a neutral position from which these observations can be made" (p 60). Extending this problem of objectivity, Holub critiques Jauss for falling into precisely what he seeks to avoid – the drawbacks of an overtly psychological entry into the reading process. One cannot for instance really measure the exact point at which "a work has disappointed, or exceeded, or destroyed expectations" (Holub, 1984, p 62). More importantly perhaps, Holub also draws our attention to how Iser and Jauss, despite their shared attempt to theorise reading, have diverged significantly. Their roots are different, Jauss hails from a grounding in literary history while Iser is inspired by phenomenology. While Jauss is interested in a historical account of the social and cultural conditions of reading, Iser is concerned mainly with the reading of an individual text. In combination perhaps they complement each other. Despite these critiques, one achievement of reader-response criticism and its subsequent uptake within audience reception studies, was the establishment of audience and reader agency, always shaped and even constrained by the provisions of the text doubtless, but even then "a convincing case could be made that the significance of literature (read media texts, for instance) was not identical with the textual object and could not be reduced to a message" (Fluck, 2000, p 178)

The voices brought together in this chapter work in very different domains, and yet they can be feasibly brought together, I suggest, in their focus on the mutuality between the interpreter and the interpreted and the location of all this in social practices, contexts and histories. None of these concepts that are

discussed in this chapter exist in isolation – in their own fields they have their own critiques, they are entangled in their own debates. But what is of interest to us is the framework they erect when brought together around the contract of interpretation. This thesis returns time and again to the central question of how far the repertoire of audience reception studies (derived from a range of disciplines) and its priorities (evidenced in the history of empirical audience research) are relevant in the age of the internet. This question is at once conceptual and empirical, and of relevance to both media audience research and new media literacies research. At the conceptual level, we ask how far concepts from audience reception are useful to theorize new textual forms and new modes of interpretation (Das, under review). At the empirical level, we transport these priorities and concepts to see how usefully they allow us to tackle an empirical question on the digital and media literacies research agenda. Note that at this point it might appear that this empirical ‘problem’ could potentially be substituted by many others, but the empirical content of this thesis presents two interesting fits to the conceptual task at hand. First, in this thesis, I link audiences and users as concepts of the interface (discussed in Chapter 1), and it is useful that the empirical investigation in question relates to new media literacies. Second, it compels us to return to moving beyond homogeneity in youthful work online and investigating both consensus and disagreement across convenient categorizations, because it forces us to ask the old questions, when do interpretations diverge? How far these instances of resistance? Which moments of consensus are of importance? In the attempt to find a response to some of these questions, this chapter has provided a conceptual repertoire that immersed itself into text and reader-oriented theories of meaning, after gleaning priorities from the history of empirical audience reception studies in Chapter 2.

In this chapter I have tried to outline specific concepts at the heart of the audience reception narrative – which are carried into a project with new media users. I brought together concepts from literary aesthetics and science and technology studies to explore two sets of concepts around text and interpretation, involved in a relationship of mutuality – the interpretative contract. These concepts are operationalized into two specific methodologies and a discussion of this operationalization follows next,

in Chapter 4. I conclude this chapter by recapitulating the concepts and ideas discussed here, framing them via the contract at the interface of interpretation and texts, as in Table 3.2. The attempt is neither to construct a watertight boundary between the two elements of the interface, nor is it to call for complete in/stability when we think of new media ‘texts’ or limitless, decontextualized polysemy when we think of modes of interpretation in the age of the internet.

Table 3.3. The conceptual repertoire of audience reception studies

Recapitulating concepts central to the interpretative contract

Text	Interpretation
Text (as opposed to work)	Horizons of expectation
Gaps	Anticipation
In/determinacy	Expectations
Genre	Consistency building
Conventions	Gap filling
Norms	Comparisons
Intertextuality	Divergence
Openness/closure	Consensus
Affordances	Work (as opposed to text)
Implied user	Appropriation
Model reader	Imagination
Encoding	Decoding

4. The interface of interpretation

In Chapter 1 I introduced this thesis by suggesting a convergence of audiences and users along the concept of interpretation. These are linked to distinctly different mediated conditions, yet they share some significant conceptual links. In this task, I suggested the role of the ‘interpretative contract’ as a useful theoretical device with which to look at the media as well as users, legibilities as well as literacies, texts as well as readers. Chapter 2 reviewed the empirical literature in the fields of audience reception studies and media and digital literacies to outline insights that are of use and debates that are of importance. Chapter 3 took this forward by looking at theories of texts and readers in contexts where a family of concepts was introduced.

This chapter looks at methodology, and it is important to begin by distinguishing between methodology and method. The former focuses on the nature of knowledge anticipated, the role of theory in the process of research design and the logic and rationale behind choices made in empirical work. Methods, on the other hand, are the instruments that are used for data gathering, as emergent from methodological decisions. I note here that I shall not review the literature on specific ‘methods’ in this chapter, analysing the relative dis/advantages of these, that is, this chapter does not collate what has been said in the literature about the use of qualitative interviews, for instance, and the advantages and challenges of interviewing. I shall focus closely on the theory-data link, the conceptual-empirical link and the logic of method selection, instrument design and interpretative strategy adopted in this project. However, significant questions – of sampling, recruitment and ethics – are also discussed in this chapter to give an insight into the empirical research that was conducted in schools across Greater London.

I divide this chapter into two very broad divisions. In the first part – decisions – I think through the theoretical shaping of the project and the ways in which this has impacted methodology. In the second part, I enter the dynamics of carrying out these decisions, ethical questions, the processes of sampling, recruitment, interviewing and analysis, and conclude with some reflections on evaluation.

Decisions

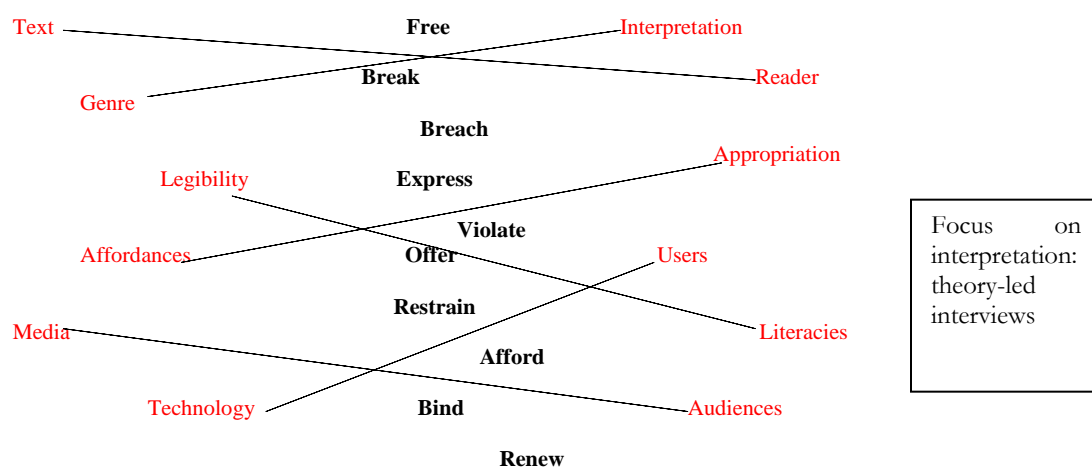
Let us at the outset recall the family of concepts discussed at length in Chapter 3, especially the interpretative contract, to demonstrate how the contract has shaped the methodological decisions in a project where research design has been intensely theory-led. Taken together, the preceding three chapters permit some theoretical observations, all of which have shaped the empirical choices made in this project. In Figure 4.1 I represent the interpretative contract graphically, to illustrate with pairs of linked words the concept of the ‘interface’ (Livingstone, 2008) introduced in earlier chapters.

Operationalizing the interpretative contract

Until now I have posed a conceptual question that was arguing for the theoretical linking of media and users in context, basing itself on the premise that the production of meaning, questions of use and appropriation of technology are intricately linked to the affordances and legibility of the media itself. In Figure 4.1 I outline how the contract is operationalized into the design of the research, and later how these concepts inform the design of the research instruments. The set of words on the right all relate to interpretation and inform the methodological decision to research literacies as interpretative work. I carry concepts such as interpretation, reading, genre and other related concepts into the design of a theory-led qualitative interview.

I remain interested in refuting the digital natives argument that broadly seeks to establish a homogenous grouping of youthful expertise. Hence, I introduce the concept of heterogeneity in literacies/interpretative work across four groups of children, often lumped together in the literature - pre, early, middle and older teens. By operationalizing the contract thus, I seek to accommodate the diverse ways in which this interactive space opens up multiple possibilities for literacies and interpretation (consider the words in bold in the centre of the figure). More importantly, the methodological implication is that I avoid the pitfalls of making claims about literacies relying solely on a textual analysis and I research interpretative work without losing sight of the text.

Fig. 4.1. Concepts of the interface: the interpretative contract as a family of transmedia concepts



Problems with and the significance of textual analysis

The analysis of texts has been important in media and communications research for a long time. If we note Gunther Kress's articulation of the three aspects of texts as genre (the shape of texts), discourse (the content and ideology of texts) and mode (Kress, 2003), we realise that all three have received substantial attention within media studies, especially the genre and discourse of texts. The text is taken as the site of representation and usefully, textual analysis reveals the politics behind the way texts

mis/represent, the ways in which language functions within the boundaries of a text and so on. The methods for doing textual analysis in media and communications studies have primarily been content analysis (e.g. Allen et al, 1997; Cumberbatch et al, 2003; Krippendorff, 2004; Downs and Smith, 2005; Pierce, 2007; Gunter, 2009) and discourse analysis (e.g. Kress, 1985, 1990, 1993; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The concern within those who analyse texts, is very often meaning, yet, as many years of empirical research with audiences have shown, meaning does not lie within the text alone and hence cannot sufficiently be understood with the analytical repertoire of a single authoritative textual analyst or even a group of them. Meaning lies at the intersect of texts and readers (in the context of this thesis, the interface between the provisions of the genre and the resources of the user), something which can only be grappled with empirical research that involves speaking to real readers who make use of the media within specific contexts which provide both symbolic resources as well as restraints. The physical boundaries of the text (consider an advertisement on the side of a bus or the structure of Facebook or the content of the evening news) then become a break or punctuation in a process of ceaseless interpretation and re-interpretation. This calls for a methodology that is able to, in some depth, look at appropriation and meaning using categories and constructs which are used within textual analysis (because they are valuable) but extending them from the authoritative claims of a single analyst to the real, lived practices of interpretation. The consequence is that the implied reader (Iser, 1978) and the implied audience (Livingstone, 1998), inherent in much analyses of 'spectatorial positioning', are replaced by a methodological aspiration to focus on the real reader and the real audience.

Yet, why does almost any piece of empirical research on audiences begin with some analysis of the text? Is the sole purpose of this to introduce the reader of the project to the text whose interpretation will in due course be studied and seen to either diverge from or coincide with the textual analysis presented? There is a broader purpose to this exercise, one that recognizes that without attention to the text, one

deletes one side of the interpretative contract. The text remains central, and as is evident in this project, the technology and its design, the concept of legibility (what is easily available to interpret, what is obfuscating) are all critical questions to consider. Does it make sense for the researcher to first analyse the text (its content or its shape or both) using a set of priorities that precede the research of interpretation, or is there a rationale for beginning with the audience first and allowing the insights from the field to feed into the analysis of the text? As a conscious decision in this project, the repertoire of concepts from audience reception studies, framed around the interpretative contract, was used to first design, conduct, code and analyse the interviews that researched interpretation, and the text emerges to be visible through the eyes of the user, in a sense.

Beyond canonized divides

As will be evident by now, this thesis took off with a theoretical agenda in mind. It responded to a set of challenges facing the field of audience reception analysis and was not conceptualized as an exploratory or descriptive project but rather one that would carry a set of theories and concepts from one context of mediation to another, to see how far these insights were valid and how far they should be revised, retained or even rejected. Of the empirical chapters that follow, two are largely deductive in orientation and one brings together deductive as well as inductive approaches to research. It is useful at this point to reflect closely on the relationship between theory and data in this project – the implications of which are evident on both sides of the empirical work process. Prior to empirical work the theory-data link shapes the extent to which the data gathering is and can be planned, it determines how open the empirical work process is to ‘surprising’ outcomes, and then, it shapes the strategy for analysis, that is, is it pre-framed, or illuminated by a pre-existing conceptual framework (as is often the case for deductive research) or does the data reveal themes that later contribute to theory (as is the case with more inductive approaches)? So, this thesis is written out of a qualitative project which adopts a primarily deductive stance – two of its empirical chapters being intensely theory-led from the outset, while one selects its

themes deductively but accommodates induction within the themes selected. Regrettably, perhaps, these questions and related ones have become canonized divides, whereby qualitative research has largely, although not solely, come to be linked with inductive approaches while deductive research is often grouped with quantitative research. This, however, is too polarized a view of research, for both traditions of reasoning span the social sciences and sometimes even the sciences (for diverse uses of these stances see Arthur, 1994; Simon, 1996; Chaffee et al, 1997; Hayes, 2000; Hyde, 2000). The polarization of philosophical positions (for instance, the empiricist versus the theorist), epistemological positions (for instance, the positivist versus the social constructionist), methodological positions (deductive versus inductive) and methods (quantitative versus qualitative) leads to the mapping of purposes and agendas onto either sides of divides (separated by the not very useful *versus*). For instance, not all quantitative research is necessarily deductive, and there can be qualitative projects, such as this, which are more deductive than inductive, and often a fruitful combination of both. Interestingly, in media and communications studies, a divide that touches on the borders of the qualitative-quantitative debate and many others but has a distinct characteristic of its own is the administrative-critical divide, which, too, has often been mapped onto questions of method (qualitative and quantitative) and/or purpose only too easily. It is outside the remit of this chapter to digress into detailed discussions of these questions or the exciting history of these divides, revolving around the administrative-critical debate in our field – a divide which has perhaps not quite disappeared altogether, although attempts towards that have been made (see Livingstone, 1993, for a review; see Lazarsfeld, 1941, for a seminal piece; see Melody and Mansell, 1983; Ang, 1987; Katz, 1987). In all, one might conclude that these divisions are not always fruitful, and neither is such a simple mapping entirely convincing because they do away with the possibility that historically opposing traditions might reside within the same scholarly mind, or that compartments are often not as watertight as they seem to be. This qualitative project adopts a deductive stance throughout, while also incorporating the richness of induction at a certain point and a certain level in the analysis.

Prior instrumentation in data gathering

I borrow the concept of prior instrumentation from Miles and Huberman's (1994) analysis of the design of research and the collection of data. The questions of little and no prior instrumentation (as outlined in Figure 4.2) derive from the link between theory and data and hence relate closely to the questions of deduction and induction. As evident from Figure 4.2, not all the features under one column might fit well with a project that bears the rough features of that column, and much hybridity is indeed possible. A combination of both is also possible. This project veered heavily towards prior instrumentation in data gathering, although in tracing the line below, I draw attention to how the scale outline is imperfect. In mine, for instance, I have not done away with the significant role of context in which the interpretative contract operates; it does not have a directly applied focus (although there are possibilities for this, which I discuss in the last chapter of this thesis, when identifying future directions). The purpose of sketching the red line is to outline how the theoretical shaping of the research instrumental has been key in the conduction of this project and also how sometimes it has tended to move away towards the centre, between the two options identified.

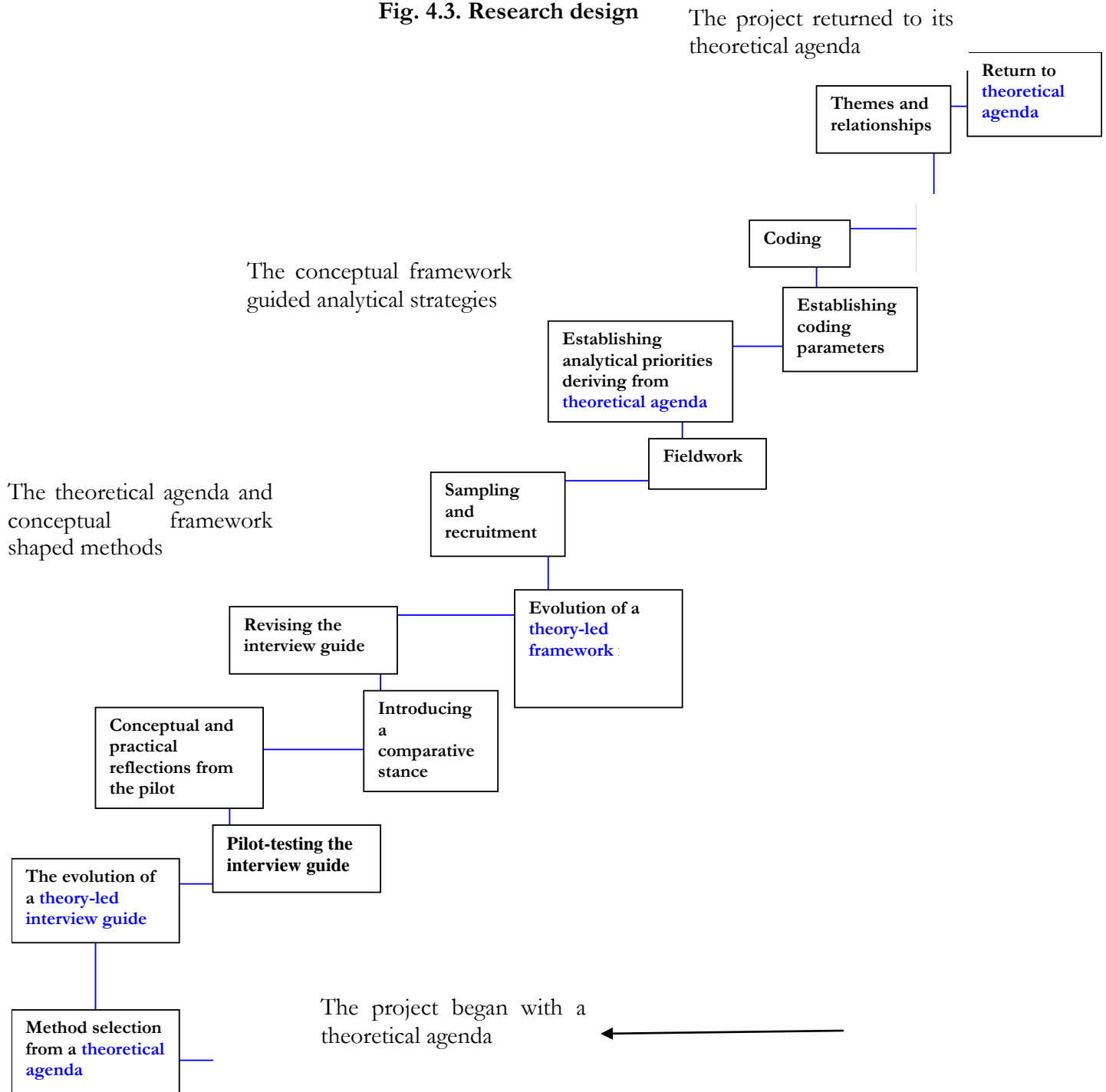
[Figure appears on the next page]

Fig. 4.2. Theory-led prior instrumentation in the project (indicated with line)

Little prior instrumentation	A lot of prior instrumentation
Rich context description needed	Context less crucial
Concept inductively grounded in local meanings	Concepts defined ahead by researcher
Exploratory, inductive	Confirmatory, theory-driven
Descriptive intent	Explanatory intent
“Basic” research emphasis	Applied, evaluation or policy emphasis
Single case	Multiple cases
Comparability not important	Comparability important
Simple, manageable, single-level case	Complex, multi-level, overloading case
Generalising not a concern	Generalizability/representativeness important
Need to avoid researcher impact	Researcher impact of less concern
Qualitative only, free standing study	Multi method study, quantitative method

Source: Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 36)

Fig. 4.3. Research design



Research design

Following from the preceding figure, I now sketch the sequential steps in research design and analysis, elaborating appropriately, as needed, with graphical representations.

Research question – The project began with a rather theory led research question that gives it its overarching shape. I ask – in what ways are some concepts from audience reception studies useful in understanding engagement with new media. More specifically, to guide the empirical research conducted for this project, I ask – in what ways do children navigate the online genre of social networking sites, not homogenously, but differently? Admittedly, the former is my core question, and it is in responding to the latter, that I use a toolkit of concepts, which themselves are the subjects of interrogation.

Method selection from a theoretical agenda has been discussed in earlier sections. Expressed briefly, the choice of methodology was determined by the priorities within the interpretative contract and the interview guide – elaborated later – carried themes emergent from within the theoretical motivations of the project.

The evolution of a theory-led interview guide. This first step led to the identification of eight conceptual priorities around the interpretative contract, as outlined below in Table 4.2. These were formulated into an interview guide that would then be pilot tested at the very start of the project.

Pilot-testing the interview guide. A two-week long pilot project was conducted with 15 young people, in their late teens and early twenties, in the form of hour-long interviews, designed as free-flowing conversations in front of the computer.

Conceptual and practical reflections from the pilot. The pilot revealed usefully that the theory-shaping of the interview guide had worked. Conceptually, it helped confirm that the concept of genre, as discussed earlier in Chapter 3, was still useful, and hence strengthened an already strongly defined theoretical agenda. It also confirmed that treating literacies and audiences as interface concepts (Livingstone, 2008) with a sufficient number of parallels in the narrative was indeed useful. Practically, the pilots revealed that the interviews needed to incorporate the role of context, interestingly located within Richard Johnson's circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986) which locates texts and readers in context. It

threw up interpretative divergence leading to the incorporation of heterogeneity as a conceptual interest in the design and theorization of this project.

Revising the interview guide. Keeping in mind a different set of thematic categories now, which moved the text reader moment into a wider context of use and related online practices, creation, critical engagement and un/critical and un/exceptional negotiation of the media – all of which were theoretical considerations – had now emerged.

Table 4.2. The beginning of a theory-led interview guide

CENTRAL CONCEPT	DISCUSSION AREA AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS
Genre	Change, recognisability, sameness, difference <i>Q: So you say Facebook is like an Ipod? Interesting, but that's different right, like it's a device to plug with earphones? Tell me a bit more about how you say it's like an Ipod?</i>
Narratives	Search for narratives, stories about self and others <i>Q: And then, would you want to find out what happened next, after your friend's update reported she lost her baggage?... that's interesting, why do you say the wall is like a story?</i>
Modes and Affordances	Multi-modality, textual spaces, modal assistance <i>Q: Very interesting, how you say you want your 'face' to be different from the others', how do you think you can really do it?</i>
Learning the Syntax	Ignoring, tackling persuasion, learning syntaxes <i>Q: So, you wouldn't even look to the right, where they advertise things? How did you figure that out?</i>
Legibilities	Privacy settings, struggles with the interface, in/expertise <i>Q: Why wouldn't you know when something bad happened? Do you think you can decide how not/to show your photos to just anyone? Or..?</i>
Phatic Functions	'Friends', 'causes' and 'events', Bringing together, collaboration <i>Q: You say you need a cuddle you go to a friend..you wouldn't be able to do that with 'friends' here then?</i>
Metaphors and Stories	Online-offline, metaphors to describe the text, familiar tales, likeness <i>Q: Why do you say it's a spider's web? You have so many friends but you say you are 'lost' in it...?</i>
Model Readers	Awareness of the author's intentions, self description <i>Q: Let's say you created Facebook, and you have to sell the idea to a funder. They need to know who this is for, what would you say? How would you describe that person? Similar to you, or?</i>

The qualitative interview

In a recent paper (Hänksa-Ahy and Das, 2011), a colleague and I thought through the use of the theory-led qualitative interview as an apt space in which conceptual concerns meet the social world and where the interview guide, through first, second and third order questions, provides a bridge between theory

and empirical. We re-position the qualitative interview by tracing the iterative process through which we move from conceptual problems to empirical questions, on to evidence and back again, showing how the interview guide establishes an ‘interpretative bridge’ between our larger questions and our methods of assembling and interpreting evidence. We do so by focusing on the operationalization and interpretative strategies of two projects focusing on two important questions in two different domains – (i) one is norm formation in international mass-mediated publics, (ii) and the other interpretative work/literacies of new media users. We show how the interview offers an apt framework for answering important questions about both international publics and new media users, by scrutinizing the rationale it offers for making inferences on the basis of transcript data. The qualitative interview, said to be a provider of ‘privileged access’ (Kvale, 1994) to the real world and the purposes and structure of which have been much discussed in qualitative research literature (see Kvale, 1983, 1994; 1996; 2006; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; and others), has been of immense importance in this project, and the following aspects of the interview were the ones that received the most attention.

- First, the interview guide was theory-led. It worked with a set of concepts derived from the interpretative contract and was pilot tested to be revised into a different organization and arrangement of thematic categories. The process of this theory-led shaping is outlined in the following section that discusses research design in sequential steps (as in Table 4.2).
- Second, the interview guide was intended as an aid and not an obstruction in the course of free-flowing conversations that could bring out rich data in interviews with children. In that sense the guide, in its revised form, anticipated the form that these conversations could take and allowed every interview to be an informal exchange.
- Third, a distinct empirical challenge of interviewing children in school, especially pre-teenage children, is that their spans of attention in being interviewed were very often limited by

classroom bells, lunch hours and what was immediately next on their agenda. The ‘researcher’ is often a scary figure – an interruption to a typical classroom day – and to put them at ease, my interviews with them took place in a wide diversity of locations within the school to which I allowed them to lead me. These included a warm cafeteria, sometimes sitting on the floor of an empty gym, letting some of the younger ones fiddle with my laptop and ask questions about its model number and the nature of my contract, sometimes sitting on the steps leading up to the ICT rooms, in chairs outside a busy classroom, in the garden, always with a laptop connected to the internet where we could go online on SNSs.

Processes

Research ethics

Of course, one must recognise that questions of consent, anonymity, protection of minors involved in a project that has worked with children, are all essential concerns. There seems to be no standard set of codes for ethics at the disciplinary level at least within media and communications, although there are precedents offered by the American Psychological Association (1992) for instance, or the American Sociological Association (1989). This project, like all projects undertaken at the London School of Economics and Political Science, had to clear the research ethics checklist and the research ethics questionnaire. The case for this particular project did not present added difficulties as the questions asked of the children did not in any obvious way ask them to divulge details that could potentially be embarrassing, upsetting or disturbing, and also because the participants in this project were not offered any form of incentive. The interviews with the children were conducted within school premises, but away from the classroom or the presence of a teacher. For this, the consent of the school was sought at the outset (which involved receiving the consent of the headteacher and the ICT teacher from whose lesson the child would need to come out to be interviewed by the researcher). All headteachers and ICT teachers who were the initial point of contact were sent an email detailing the title, nature and purposes

of the study. This was followed by one or more personal visits to the school and/or telephone conversations with these headteachers and ICT teachers who asked me in detail the kind of questions the child would be asked and the duration of time the child would have to spend in the interview. They were assured of the confidentiality of the process, that is, that not only would the child's real name not be divulged but that all contact details would be destroyed (as they have been). While schools are free to consent to their students being interviewed, one private international school required all its parents to sign parental consent forms, which had been prepared and sent to the schools beforehand. Another private school required me to go through a List 99 check from which they received a green signal upon which I was allowed to interview the children. Most importantly, at the start of every interview, I explained to the child the purposes of this project and what they would be questioned about. Participation was purely voluntary and some refused to participate and were not asked a second time. Interviews were completely private and were not overheard by anyone, I did not find any children being bullied or sharing porn and most negative experiences they shared were of others they knew or had heard of through friends, the media or family. Some children spoke of negative experiences in their past which they themselves noted had prepared them for anticipating the potential 'dangers' on Facebook.

Decisions in sampling and recruitment

This project worked with children from across four age groups covering teenage years and the immediate pre-teen years, all of whom would be interviewed at school. The following decisions guided sampling:

- It was decided to sample an equal number of children in each of the four age groups to facilitate comparison across age groups. The number of children was fixed at 60, as a number large enough to facilitate paired interviews and to lead to diverse data, and as a number small enough to make for a realistic qualitative project.

- A socio-demographic spread roughly matching UK national averages (in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class) was prioritized.
- A range of schools were sampled from a database of schools in London, covering the categories of state schools, private schools, mixed and single gender schools, international schools, schools with a specialization in media/design subjects, and schools with a majority of children from non-white backgrounds.
- From each of these categories, from within schools that agreed to be a part of this study, a single school was selected. In that school, children were sampled keeping in mind the overall ambitions of the project to roughly follow the SES spread of the national averages, within an equal number of children in each age group. A range of competencies with online media was paid attention to when selecting individual respondents. This was discussed before sampling, in conversations with the ICT teacher, usually.

Recruitment followed these stages, keeping sampling priorities in mind:

- At the outset, schools were sampled from the profiles gathered from a school evaluation reports database. The strategy at this stage was to sample 10 times more the number of schools than would actually be needed in each category. Hence I sampled 10 schools each from the categories of private (both genders), state, state with majority from non-white backgrounds, and international schools (these were fewer in number).
- Next, a prelim letter conveying information about the project, nature of the topic, duration of the interview, timings and other details, was sent by email to the headteachers and if relevant, the heads of ICT at these schools. A time-consuming and somewhat elaborate process of many

rounds of emails, telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings ensued with those who responded, and finally the desired mix of schools was selected.

- An unequal number of children were sampled from each of the schools prioritizing the demographic spread desired. The large majority of children came from two state schools, one of which had an arts and media specialization and an Afro-Asian majority, and a not insignificant minority came from a private boys school, a private girls school and a sixth came from an international school. The schools were spread across the Greater London area.
- In the final sample of interviewees, half were girls and half boys, each of the four age groups had around a fourth of the total sample in them, a little less than a fifth came from non-white ethnic backgrounds, and there was a very wide range of socio-economic categories, with most children coming from homes that fell under the last four of the five class version of the National Statistics classification. Details of the sample divided by age, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity are attached in the appendices.

Interviews

Interviews were carried out in a concentrated phase in autumn 2009 and in the early days of 2010. Children were interviewed in pairs, at school, during ICT lessons, but away from the classroom, in an empty and quiet space. The pairing of children was done in way that children who knew each other were interviewed together and they were able to sustain a level of interaction between them during the conversation. This was important for the method because it led to interesting revelations about children's perceptions of their peer's online activities and experiences. All interviews were conducted in front of a computer connected to the internet, and despite being theoretically shaped, the interviews were, on purpose, made to flow like easy-going conversations. Interviews involved the maintenance of regular notes at the end of each day of empirical work, on the nature of the children interviewed, and

observations, if any, from their social networking websites. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the children and were fully transcribed prior to coding. Interviews were roughly half an hour to under an hour long, which corresponded to the length of an academic period in the daily routine of the school.

In what follows I present an account of the interview process with two contrasting interviews, where one was perhaps more successful than the other simply because in the successful one I was able to engage the children in conversation better and hence learn more. In the case of interviewing eleven year olds Sophia and Alan, my role was often to make sure that I had covered everything I wanted to cover and push them when they hesitated. Both were chatty kids and were eager to talk to me. In contrast, Alice, also eleven, was a very quiet and subdued child. Unlike Sophia and Alan, she did not seem to have a very active life on social networks and shared domestic burdens that often proved to be more than what she could handle.

In discussing the interviews, I will commute between the two sets of interviews to make my point rather than finish discussing one and move on to the second. I have tried to clearly display the interview process, the analytic procedures deployed to “read” out of the data and a portrait of the individuals’ overall ways of relating to Facebook, including the ways in which the results may outrun its intended goals. I wanted to interview the children in private, i.e. when other children were not around. But in the case of Sophia and Alan, the teacher did not permit us to leave the classroom and despite the environment being very noisy indeed, I interviewed them in the presence of other students. This presented difficulties such as distraction – both of them were very distracted by classmates who wanted to join in, contribute their views or poke them with a pencil and then go and hide!

I interviewed Sophia and Alan during an ICT lesson. This was the second in the series of interviews. Both of them were pre-teens in Year 7 in an inner city state school and were very eager to participate in an interview about Facebook. Both came from working class families and seemed to have access to laptops and computers. The interview was conducted inside the classroom with other eager children jumping around and trying to listen in, and the teacher shouting out instructions to the students, which made recording difficult. I began the interview by inviting them to tell me a little about themselves and their lives from which I could later make a segue into their use of the internet, and more specifically, Facebook.

Sophia - One of my sisters has just finished her GCSEs, one sister is at college and working, my brother goes to Holloway School.

Interviewer- Okay, and your parents?

Sophia- My dad works just part time, like only...he works Monday to Saturday. He's got Sunday off. He delivers, he's a delivery man, he has to deliver like food and salad and stuff to like Manchester. He gets lots of money for it though. It's a good job, he gets lots for it, and my mum goes to the parish church and she looks after kids at our house.

Interviewer - That's interesting.

Alan - Well, me and my sister usually do homework with each other or that lot. My brother just goes on like MSN, Facebook, say that they want to go to the cinema and that lot.

Interviewer - What do your parents do?

Alan - My parents? They usually work or watch TV or that lot.

Interviewer - Do they work outside the home or go to an office?

Alan - My mum works as an accountant, and my dad, he just likes decorates stuff.

Unlike Sophia and Alan, Alice seemed almost depressed when she agreed to speak to me. As I tried to lead her into talking about herself and her life more, she gave me short and clipped responses, with long pauses and silences in between. Alice's was my first interview and I stumbled as well in encountering an eleven year old who looked sad, burdened and almost unwilling to engage.

Interviewer - Okay, um and what else do you like doing?

Alice - Computer.

Interviewer - That's nice, and what do you do on your computer?

Alice - Facebook.

Interviewer - And um...any, any other hobby? What is your normal day like usually?

Alice - What do you mean?

Interviewer - A normal day, you wake up in the morning and then...?

Alice - I get dressed.

Interviewer - Come to school.

Alice - Come to school.

Interviewer - Do you walk to school or do you have to take a bus?

IE Take a bus.

At points I feigned ignorance to give them a chance to describe things that clearly excited them. In most cases, as in the case of Sophia and Alan below it worked.

Alan- I live near the school, and when I finish my homework, I like going on the computer, on Facebook, MySpace, play Wii sometimes.

Interviewer- What's that?

Sophia - Nintendo Wii, it's like a Playstation.

Alan - It's a game.

Interviewer- It's on the computer?

Alan- No, it's like a computer, on the computer but it's connected to the TV. It's a computer that connects up to your TV, and like a games console that connects up to your TV, and you play it with your remote control.

Interviewer- Oh really, and how are you connected to the Internet?

Alan - No, it's not connected to the Internet, it's connected to the back of your TV. You play with the controls.

But this strategy was not useful in the case of Alice. If I said little, she said nothing at all. If I spoke a bit more than I had expected to, eventually she would speak. This is something I worked out over the course of the interview as we got to know each other better. But if I pretended to not know about something that engaged her, or if I truly did not know what she was speaking about, unlike Sophia and Alan, Alice would shut down.

Interviewer - So, for entertainment, and what other kinds of groups have you joined?

Alice- I don't know...like, I joined like what I like, because they do like a skills group.

Interviewer - What skills?

Alice- Skills.

Interviewer - Skills of doing what?

Alice- Do you know the Skills?

Interviewer -No, what are they?

Alice- Leave it.

Sophia explained to me that she has her own computer – her parents have given her and her brother a laptop each. Her father has his own laptop too, but her mother, she tells me, doesn't quite like it. It was easy to draw them into talking about their homes as they both seemed close to their parents and eager to talk about what they did at home and what home life was like. The internet and the ways in which they used the internet seemed connected closely to the parenting styles they were exposed to at home and they made these connections easy to spot.

Alan- My friends are like next door to me, and my mum still wants me to be home early, so I have to come in early.

Interviewer - You have a cellphone?

Alan Yes.

Interviewer - Okay, so your mum can phone you and find out? And, when do you have to be home?

Sophia - I can be home anytime I like, but I usually be home like early, because then I can finish my homework, and then I can be free.

Interviewer - But, you can come home anytime you like?

Sophia - Yes, but I don't usually stay out late. I get a lift from school, so I probably go to the shops and then I come after that.

Later, both reveal that their parents are involved in their internet use by advising them on who they should or should not be speaking to.

Alan - My mum always tells me like, you shouldn't speak to people you don't know and that lot, and every time I try to add someone, she always checks my friends and that lot, just to see if I know them.

Interviewer - And, you're happy with that?

Alan - Yes.

Interviewer - And, you?

Sophia - I discuss it a lot with my parents, because the people that I add...because on the news there was a thing that a girl thought she was meeting someone, a 17-year-old boy when she was on Facebook chat room, but she was actually meeting an old man, and she got pulled in at school. She went to meet him and he pulled her, so that's why my parents always check it to see.

In the section below I notice during the interview that they place a huge amount of trust on the people behind Facebook but instead of correcting them I allow them to express this faith.

Alan - I you're not really allowed to write anything rude on Facebook, because people can report you and then you'll get banned from Facebook.

Interviewer - Who will report you?

Alan - Other people, if they find your status offensive, they can report you and you will completely get banned from Facebook and you can't make another one.

Sophia - On Facebook, they completely shut the whole programme down from your computer.

Interviewer - Okay, so the people behind Facebook?

Sophia - Yes, there's a managing team, and if you say that someone is like harassing you that you don't know, sending you messages and they're not your friend, you can report them and they will get banned from Facebook, or if someone finds your status offensive, then they'll report you and you'll get banned from Facebook completely.

This sense of security and trust in the team behind Facebook is accompanied by a sense of vulnerability and feeling unsafe at the hands of clever people around them. But they also work out their own strategies and my task as interviewer was often just to put in a word of encouragement in order to invite them to explain things further. In this snapshot below, one notices that they are confidently unsure and unclear, for instance about protecting themselves.

Interviewer - Do you know how to change your settings, privacy settings? How do you do it?

Alan- Well, I just go on Google, right and change it. I can add, delete the Facebook or change it.

Sophia - You can go to settings on your profile and you can change that, like the person, if you have any MSN email address, you can change that.

Interviewer- What do you do on Google, what were you saying about that?

Alan - I just, said I go on Google, to change the Facebook password and I just do it.

While Sophia and Alan were confidently unsure of their strategies but still knew about potential risks, with Alice it was a little different – she seemed unaware of the dangers Sophia and Alan seemed to be so aware of. But Alice had also clarified to me that she didn't have too many friends and would like to expand her social circle. She lived with her disabled mother and a not very kind step-father and she would add people to her friends list with almost no checks in place. This is evident from the snapshot below where on hindsight it seems my concern for Alice's safety becomes a bit too evident as I get carried away in the conversation where she tells me how her profile is virtually public.

Interviewer - If you got a friend request from somebody, how would you know that person is a real person? Do you know that person well?

Alice- I don't know, just add them if I see a picture of them.

Interviewer - And, then how much do you say about you? Does it say where you live and stuff?

Alice- You can write that, you can write like if you live in Islington, you can say Islington and that's it. United Kingdom, and like that's it, and you can write like um...you can write your age in there, but people don't.

Interviewer - And, have you got your real name on there?

Alice- My real name, yes.

Interviewer - And, your photos and everything?

Alice- Yes.

While my role was often to feign ignorance, or to nudge them along with the occasional ‘yes’ or ‘cool’, sometimes I pushed them to clarify things and think aloud strategies that seemed to be problematic. In the section below for instance, I push them to explain how they would decide who was an “okay” friend to accept a friend request from. My interview with Alice had taught me that this has to be done subtly and with an air of genuine interest rather than in a tone that is challenging or can be perceived to be such, in any way.

Interviewer - How would you know who to accept?

Alan- Because they have a picture on it.

Sophia- Sometimes, if you don't know the person, there's a button called mutual friend, and if you click on it, and then you can see that the person is friends with people that you know, then you can accept, but if they're friends with people you don't know and you don't know the person, then you shouldn't really accept it.

Interviewer - So, how do you decide? You look at the photo and then you decide?

Alan - You look at the Facebook picture, and look up their name.

Interviewer - How would the picture tell you anything?

Alan - If the person has a picture and you don't recognise the face, you could look at mutual friends, and if they don't have friends in common with you, then you don't accept it.

In the instance below, note how my role as interviewer shifts from saying the occasional ‘ok’ towards almost providing support for someone clearly distressed. In hindsight, perhaps I should have been less engaged primarily because I would not be able to continue my support of the child or even resolve anything for her; but at that moment, perhaps it was a mix of my own engagement with her story and an attempt to get her to say something, anything at all, which made me say the things I did.

Alice- I was on the computer and I'm not allowed out for further notice.

Interviewer - Until how long?

Alice- Further notice, until she decides.

Interviewer - Until further notice is a long time.

Alice- Because I was too rude.

Interviewer - You don't look like a rude girl. You're so sweet, you're so very sweet, but sometimes mums get tired, I think. Mums get tired and mums get irritated.

Alice- Mum can be like angry with me, because she's disabled and she can't feed herself.

Interviewer - So, you get bored?

Alice- Yes.

Interviewer - Yes, but when you get bored, people get rude. When I get tired, I get rude. It depends, and then you...

Alice- Well, mum like suggested it to me, like oh, if you do that, or that, and say if mum forgets about it and she does it again, and I'll go, oh no, she's already done it, and I shut up.

Interviewer - I'm sure you will get the use back soon.

Up till now I have focused on the way in which I conducted the interviews. Coding for the interviews differs by chapter in this thesis, depending on the deductive or inductive nature of the analysis, but for the chapter on heterogeneity in interpretation for instance, I follow a mix of deductive and inductive stances. Of course, one chunk of data can be “read” in a range of manners. Consider the section below. It was coded inductively, for ‘creative explorations’, ‘reaching out’ and ‘trying new things’.

Sophia - There's a website called picnic.co.uk and if you upload your photos, you can put hearts on it, you can put a frame around it, you can write stuff on it, if there's a picture of you and your friends, you can write on that.

Alan - I've got an I-pod touch so I can take pictures, send it to the I-pod, like edit it and send them back to the computer.

Interviewer- And, then do you have your own blog to put them, or on You Tube channels or something? No. But, you edit your pictures, you like doing it, and do your friends do it?

Sophia - Yes, we do it a lot.

Alan - Most of my photos are like edited by me and my friends. We just put like frames around them.

Sophia - I have a lot of pictures from when it snowed, like really heavily and we put that on.

The section below for instance was coded under ‘comparisons’ – which was a deductive point of interest for me – i.e. I was interested in how children build differential anticipations and expectations of varieties within the same genre. The latter sections also got coded under ‘strategies’. Both of these featured prominently in my interview guide, as discussed in this chapter, and as a top down deductive category in my coding framework. Notice, how, during the interview I begin the topic not by asking them a question about other versions of Facebook but merely by stating that I don’t have a profile myself. That sets them talking, in a sense.

Interviewer - I don’t have MySpace.

Alan - You don’t get to talk to people though. You don’t contact people. You just have a MySpace but Facebook, I think Facebook is much better than MySpace.

Interviewer - Everybody says that.

Sophia - It’s a lot safer.

Interviewer - Why is that?

Sophia - Because like I said, if you’re not friends, then they can’t see any of your information.

Interviewer - Can they on MySpace?

Sophia - They can on MySpace, you can go onto your profile, they can see your age, your name, your address, how old you are. And you can’t on Facebook, it’s private until you accept them.

Alan - If you know that someone is backing it, you can delete them on Facebook, so they can’t get your profiles and that, but you can delete on MSN as well and make a new one.

Interviewer - There is some bad things about Facebook. If you delete your Facebook because you don’t want to go on it anymore, they still keep your information on their computer, so they still have your name, age, address, everything on your computer, and that’s not really good.

Interviewer - Yes, I know, and MySpace doesn’t do that?

Sophia - They probably do, but because they've got a big site, I wasn't happy that I found out that once you delete with Facebook, they've still got your information on computer, because at first I didn't know that, when I made my Facebook, but then I found out that they keep...because they said on the news that if you want to make a Facebook, and you delete it, like they're going to keep the information on Facebook.

Alan - And, sometimes yes, I just like make up some addresses and that lot, and make up names, so people can't get my real names.

Having provided a glimpse of the interview process, strategies during interviewing and some instances of how data was read out of or coded, I provide below a fuller list of the deductive and inductive categories of codes I used in reading the interviews. Note that the top-level categories were usually decided a priori and the categories at the next level emerged out of the data and categories were often used in conjunction as I have just illustrated above.

1. EXPECTATIONS AND ANTICIPATIONS

- a. Positive
 - i. Widening of social network
 - ii. Creative expectations
 - iii. Collaborative expectations
- b. Negative
 - i. Anticipating problems
 - ii. Disappointment

2. PROBLEM SOLVING; STUMBLING

- a. Resolving problems
 - i. Retrospection and revision
 - ii. Seeking help
 - iii. Strategies
- b. Stumbling
 - i. Instances
 - ii. Failing to anticipate problems
 - iii. Failing to resolve

3. EXPERTISE AND GUESSWORK

- a. Expertise
 - i. Syntactic
 - ii. Semantic
 - iii. Intertextuality
 - iv. Comparisons
- b. Guesswork
 - i. Syntactic
 - ii. Semantic

4. RESISTANCE AND ACCEPTANCE

- a. Ignoring

- i. Textual spaces
 - ii. Requests from others
 - iii. Commercial spaces
- b. Critique
 - i. Semantic
 - ii. Syntactic
- c. Acceptance
 - i. Textual spaces
 - ii. Requests from others
 - iii. Commercial spaces

5. COLLABORATION; DISCONNECTION

- a. Collaboration
 - i. Textually afforded
 - ii. Pushing textual boundaries
 - iii. Participation
 - iv. Reaching out
- b. Disconnection
 - i. Disappointment and disconnection
 - ii. Intended disconnection

6. IMMERSION; BOREDOM

- a. Immersion
 - i. Trying new things
 - ii. Consistency building
- b. Boredom
 - i. Continuing despite boredom
 - ii. Leaving the text

Establishing analytical priorities in thematic analysis

In this project, the deductive nature of the bulk of the analysis provided a pre-existing theoretical framework guiding thematic analysis. The next steps – **establishing a coding framework** and **the process of coding** itself – are both discussed in the following section that delves deeper into the analytical and interpretative strategy in this project.

Identifying themes and relationships

After coding, the identification of themes and relationships between code steps, meta code levels and the incorporation of data into the deductive conceptual framework led to an integration of the concerns outlined in the first chapter. In identifying relationships, I returned to the core concepts and fields of

audiences and literacies, which provided a direction to this thesis. It was evident that both these projects, audiences and literacies, are conceptually rooted at the interface (Livingstone, 2008) of readers and texts in context.

Returning to the theoretical agenda

In the end, the journey began towards finally integrating concerns in the two fields, as outlined in the agenda sketched in Chapter 1. I returned to the key words in this project to now read them in a transmedia framework and work out the possibilities and complexities of using them as analytical and empirical tools in the new media world, and hence also to comment on their continued relevance. Investigating these concepts which helped me think of literacies as more than just technical skills, I could reach the second, broader ambition lying beneath this endeavour, which tried to understand how this involvement with the media and digital literacies project opens up a space to retain, revisit and revise concepts at the heart of audience reception studies as it moves from mass to interactive media. While possibilities indicate a revival, renewal and at least a continuing validity of these many decades old ideas, complexities identify puzzling areas for much new research. Table 4.3 selects three concepts from reception analysis that were used to make sense of youthful engagement with SNSs, in this thesis. In Table 4.3 I make conclusions from the empirical data, about both promises and challenges in using them for research with new media use and literacies. While these emerged in the context of research with a specific genre, they could perhaps be used to think about interpretative engagement across other new media genres.

Table 4.3. Transmedia concepts? Returning to theory

CONCEPT	POSSIBILITIES	COMPLEXITIES
Horizon of expectations	Theoretically grounds the reader's range of references, the role of contemporary socio-cultural contexts.	Is not at first sight useful for accommodating creativity and content creation but can be extended to include it.
Gap filling	Focuses attention on gaps in something to be read/written, central to media and digital literacies. Is a key conceptual aid in understanding the norms and conventions of new media legibilities	Gaps in what? Texts are no longer a stable, unchangeable form out there, that can be archived,
Wandering viewpoint	Continues to be useful in seeing how use/interpretation looks at the whole text in sections, how interpretation is cumulative	It remains unclear, whether the concept is useful beyond this point for interactive, non-linear, non-narrative interfaces.

Having thus outlined the sequence of steps in the design of this project, I now move deeper into the analytical and interpretative strategy adopted for this thesis.

Analytical strategy

As maintained throughout this chapter, the analytical strategy in this thesis is primarily deductive and two of the three empirical chapters are highly theory-led where the analysis is pre-framed with the help of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3. The strategy in Chapter 6 is, however, convergent of deductive and inductive stances and these called for different coding frameworks as outlined below. Thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Daly et al, 1997; Joffe and Yardley, 2003; King, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2008) has been the analytical method used in this project, with a deductive orientation in Chapters 7 and 8, which has used the template coding approach of Crabtree and Miller (1999), and with a deductive-inductive orientation in Chapter 6 which has combined the template coding approach of Crabtree and Miller (1999) with the inductive coding approach derived from Boyatzis (1998). As such, Chapter 6 makes use of a combination of *a priori* coding (nearer the

deductive stance, with a pre-set theoretical orientation) and emergent coding (more emergent from the data itself) using the 'in between' models of Lofland (1971) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) as outlined in Miles and Huberman (1994).

Table 4.4. The revised interview guide

Keyword	Concepts	Interview guide (two leads/prompts from below, per 'concept'...)
CONTEXTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics • Spaces • Home/family • Friends • Media histories • Internet in life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age, sex, private/public school, home/school (where), idea of socio-economic status... • Social media at home, outside home, mobile, ICT classes, use hours • Parents (profession/backgrounds), other adults at home, comp sharing (?), rules, siblings (schools/age) • Social life, nights out, activities, hobbies, interests, communication (on/offline), tech-savvy friends (?), me? • TV/PC/video games/laptop when, own/shared, iPods/gadgets, sharing content, SNS when, migration, loyalty • Net for schoolwork, leisure, at school ICT, at home, downloading, P2P, internet for groups/causes/political purposes?
GENRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipating • Comparing • Model readers • Conventions • <i>Gaps (filling)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the history of SNS, migrations, what's different from email days, what's different from cells • Comparisons: own use/profiles vs others, Fb vs others, SNS vs other Web 2.0, comparing affordances, elements • 'Ideal user': activity: sell the idea of SNS to someone, define the ideal user and then, where are you (un/like 'them'...) • Privacy policies, private-public spaces, civic spaces, 'sharing' spaces • Wandering off, leaving the text (ads, other attractions, distractions), problematic/illegible moments
INTERPRETATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intertextuality • <i>Wandering viewpoint</i> • <i>Knowledgeable reader</i> • Narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-genre apps, cross-platform use, migration across platforms, genre loyalties, other fandoms on SNS? • 'Consistency building': connecting sections/elements, the coherent whole, textual spaces (wall, inbox, photos) • Contexts of SNS, telling the story 'like it is', 'why do people SNS?', 'why do you think they leave'... • Telling/seeking stories (status updates, comments, following news feeds, selecting specific feeds, ignoring some, wall)
LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competencies • Progression • Role of peers • Role of adults • Aspiration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills, practical/technical skills, expertise, ease, speed, comfort or discomfort with technology • Histories (paralleling or behind tech innovation?), seeking out new things (google wave?), 'old' things (twitter?) • Comparisons? Helping, seeking help (formal/informal), collaborative work, sharing links/insights/thoughts • Helping, seeking help (formal/informal), collaborative work, sharing links/insights/thoughts • Creative wishes, pushing boundaries, learning syntax (copying links?)
CREATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-expression • Self-representation • Confidence • Experimentation • Genre boundaries • <i>Boredom/overstrain</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own content offline, hosting/maintaining webpage, music/artwork, showing/sharing offline, online, profile pics • Profile info and pic (honesty, tweaks, posing), pro-social statements about others pics, profile as me • Goals/just for fun, self-consciousness, distraction, display/showing off, creating online vs distributing online, skills • Originality, speed, fonts, visual display, bend towards more open syntaxes (?) • Pushing against boundaries (probing Q: <i>why can't you do...</i>), comparing with others, sense of ownership of profile space... • Leaving the text, letting go, disconnecting (why/when)
CRITICAL LITERACIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension • Hyperlink: assessment • Alternative readings • (Tackling)/manipulation • Participation • Care • Ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguishing content/ad, causes, groups (joining for numbers?), '<i>friending</i>' anyone (?), privacy settings, info evaluation • Observe: clicking links (thought, selection, assessment, assumed), meaningfully linking narratives, passing links on • Navigational decisions (observe but also '<i>and what would you do...?</i>' Qs, playing with pre-structured paths, macrostructure) • Persuasive devices: recognition, ignoring, falling for manipulation, coercive messages, forced links, event invites, apps • Groups/causes (just joining or deeper), offline engagement/activities and online ones, what activities, online? SNS? • Findings out about others, following up others' worries, seeking updates, (observe wall posts), offline strands... • Privacy pushing, spamming. Honesty/openness, downloading content to re-circulate, flouting offline norms

The four empirical chapters: divergent ways of engaging with the empirical

In this project, four distinct modes of approaching the data are employed in the four empirical chapters, outlined in Table 4.5. In each, my mode of engagement with the empirical is different, and in each the results obtained speak to different purposes.

Table 4.5. Mode of engagement with the empirical

Chapter title	Mode of engagement with the empirical
The resources and limits of interpretation	Description
Heterogeneity in interpretation	Evidence seeking
The task of interpretation	Illustration
Concepts in interpretation	Abstraction

In Chapter 5, the resources and limits of interpretation, I begin with a description of the contexts within which texts and interpretation are shaped and find meaning. In this descriptive account, my endeavour is to outline some patterns in the contextual resources and restraints which may shape interpretative work, to be discussed in later chapters. The resources provided by Chapter 5 help construct the evidence presented in Chapter 6, where I provide evidence of heterogeneity in interpretative work across these children. In Chapter 7, I use empirical evidence illustratively to explore the range of responsibilities involved in interpretation. In Chapter 8 I abstract from the preceding empirical chapters to reflect on a selection of concepts that have been the ‘tools’ in the process of operationalization and analysis.

The template coding approach

Picking up from Crabtree and Miller (1999), the coding for these chapters depended on the establishment of a code manual, a theory-led, pre-framed set of codes, developed *a priori* (Miles and Huberman, 1994) for thematic analysis where theories drove and shaped the design of research. The code manual provided a practical, and almost tangible breakdown of the conceptual priorities in the project and systematized the large amounts of data involved. The code manual for Chapter 7 which accommodated modes of interpretative engagement began from pre-defined primary categories, derivative from the interpretative contract – genre, affordances, anticipations and expectations, creation, resistance, intertextuality. Each of these codes was broken down into sub-levels.

To summarise,

- All codes for these two chapters derived from the pre-defined conceptual framework.
- They were part of a clearly structured hierarchical organization of code levels (up to a maximum of three).
- Codes were clearly defined (that is, they were operationally defined and were assigned ‘names’)
- Each code therefore has a name/label, definition and description.
- It is important to note here, that while Crabtree and Miller’s (1999) approach to the template coding format seeks to avoid the line by line scrutiny of more inductive coding styles such as immersion-crystallization or editing, the data was read and re-read repeatedly despite having used a template coding approach to allow for a more holistic and precise coding process that took into account the dataset as a ‘whole’.

A mix of deduction and induction

Organized around four pre-decided themes, Chapter 6 focuses on meta themes. These themes were theoretically shaped and defined the structure of the interview guide. Within these first level categories, sub-themes were allowed to emerge from the data, revealing rich patterns from what the interviews revealed. The instance of the perceptions of negative spaces is useful here. This is an instance of within-theme emergent coding, where under the pre-framed theme of ‘critical literacies’, children’s experience and anticipations of potential harm on SNSs, which was a small part of the critical literacies section of the theory-led interview guide, emerged to be significant in the data and hence was allowed a greater space in the analysis under critical literacies than would ordinarily have been accommodated by a purely deductive stance.

Hybridizing template coding and immersive/emergent coding¹²

Keeping in mind the deductive nature of analysis across themes and the inductive spaces within themes, in Chapter 6, a more in between approach was adopted for coding, combining the template scheme and the more inductive approaches of Boyatzis (1998), Lofland (1971) and Bogdan and Bilken (1992). This pre-decided four major categories (themes) as bins within which emergent codes would be distributed. The four categories in the code manual (the first level of codes, using the template model) which were theory-led formed the four themes for comparison amongst the four age groups, and these were – the role of syntax, resistance and acceptance, creation, collaboration and engagement and critical literacies. Within each theme, however, the inductive strategy of

¹² A brief note on the use of qualitative data analysis software is needed at this point. In a very theory-led project, that used *a priori* template coding for most of its analysis, the use of NVivo as a device to organize, archive and draw links between the themes identified was useful. There is a debate in the literature on whether the use of computer-assisted technologies only serves to obfuscate data or take away from the interpretative richness that qualitative research necessitates, but clarity in coding and an alternative mode/medium of managing this process (which CAQDAS provides) is found to be in now against the spirit of immersing oneself in the process of qualitative research – at least in the case of an intensely theory-led project where *a priori* coding categories, a software to manage the codes and themes was found to be useful.

Boyatzis (1998) was followed. These inductive or emergent codes were never separate from the major code levels (keeping in mind that the stance across themes was still deductive); however, they substantially expanded the major coding levels to incorporate newer and richer data. Each code, irrespective of level, was assigned a name, definition and description. For the inductive and emergent level of codes within each meta theme, Lofland's (1971) scheme was found to be useful in identifying codes. This included looking for acts, activities, meanings, participation, relationships and settings.

Table 4.6. Coding levels for Chapter 6 showing both deductive (level 1 and 2) categories and inductive (level 3) categories combining template coding (Crabtree and Miller, 1999) and emergent coding (Boyatzis, 1998)

Complete list of primary <i>a priori</i> categories developed theoretically (deductive)	Complete list of secondary <i>a priori</i> codes (deductive)	One instance of an emergent code (inductive)
Negotiating syntax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipating syntax • Model readers • Comparing syntax • Awareness of conventions • Intertextuality • Narrative • The knowledgeable reader • Gap filling 	Multi-platform references Code label: MultiPlatRef Definition: this applies to all instances where intertextual references span multiple media and platforms.
Resistance and acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing persuasion • Tackling manipulation • Alternative readings • Genre boundaries • Experimentation 	Ignoring adverts Code label: IgnoreAd Definition: this applies to instances where strategies of ignoring advertisements are discussed.
Creation, collaboration, engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expression • Collaboration • Boredom 	Groups and causes Code label: GroupCause Definition: this applies to all instances where purposes and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation • Care • Ethics • Role of peers • Creation 	processes of joining and participating in causes or groups is discussed.
Critical literacies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension • Assessment • Evaluation • Competencies • Progression • Awareness 	Perceptions of harm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perverts and paedophiles • Stalking • Hacking Example code label: PervsPaedos Example code definition: this applies to all instances where children refer to un/known figures as perverts or paedos harassing them online.
Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics • Spaces • Home/family • Media histories • Interests • Internet in life 	Sharing computers Code label: ShareComp Definition: This applies to all instances where the sharing of PCs or laptops and the implications thereof are discussed.

Notes on evaluation

The evaluation of qualitative research is the concern of many, in a range of fields (see Ambert et al, 1995; Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Stiles, 1999; Clissett, 2008; Fossey et al, 2002; Merriam, 2002). It seems, one must ask, has the link between theory and data been thought through carefully? If there has been hybridity in terms of paradigms (for instance, a combination of the empirical and the interpretative), hybridity in terms of stances (deduction and induction) and hybridity in terms of methodologies (as is often the case with triangulation), have the reasons for these decisions been made discursively apparent and are these convincing? Then one may wish to ask whether the instruments selected for data gathering (the methods) have served the purposes within the research aims – so, in this case, for instance, have qualitative interviews served the broader theoretical agenda

well? Was the sampling frame relevant and rigorous? Could it have been done differently? In a project that worked with young children, have research ethics been carefully thought through? What, if any, were the challenges? Finally, what are the dangers linked with a deductive approach to research, and what may have been sacrificed in the process? A selection of these questions guide my evaluation below of the research presented in this thesis.

The dangers of a purely deductive stance are immediately apparent, although much of the caveats associated with these base themselves on a divorce between deduction and induction and on extreme versions of these stances. However, this project, doubtless, used theoretically shaped and concept-driven research instruments and it involved a coding a framework and analytical strategy that was to a large extent preframed. This, I stress was necessary to keep the original theoretical agenda in mind – it had not been conceptualized as an exploratory project. It had been conceptualized as an empirical investigation of whether the insights of a certain field of study were useful for illuminating the study of another field, and which concepts needed to be revised or rejected along the way. In the chapters that come next, I have made the following attempts to both justify the primarily deductive stance in this project and to do justice to the richness of themes that the interview presented.

Miles and Huberman (1994) maintain that pre-designed and structured instruments blind the researcher to the site. As the analysis presented in Chapter 6 will reveal, the interpretative contract has been seen in context, the importance of symbolic resources and restraints brought to the moment of interpretation has been recognized and accommodated within the conceptualization of the contract. The analysis is not merely an account of the fact that youthful literacies are heterogenous, but the focus rather is on why diversity occurs, when and why it is important? I have

thus been acutely conscious of questions such as why a 13-year-old is more confused with the negative spaces within SNSs than a 17-year-old, who laughs at these fears, for instance.

Miles and Huberman (1994) also maintain that prior instrumentation in research is often context stripped. Following from the above, the discussion on creative and critical competencies in the next few chapters (especially Chapter 6) or on unexceptional modes of interpretative engagement places specific attention on the diverse contexts from which the children participating in this project were negotiating websites. The sampling strategy in particular made it a priority to include schools that collectively served a wide cross-section of society. The socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of these children, and their parental resources and home environments, all formed significant parts of the context in which the interpretative contract always works – and this all was a priority in the way this project was conducted. Hence, concepts (the focal point of this project) were always working in contexts.

More generally, it is widely accepted that deductive analysis is too tightly tied to the pre-framed themes to recognize or make space for emergent themes that are equally or even richer sources of information about a phenomenon. As Chapters 7 and 8 reveal, the analysis presented in these chapters is theory-led. I enter analysis with a set of pre-defined concepts, emergent from within the theoretical agenda, because in these chapters the aim all along has been to look at the retention and revision of certain concepts from moments of mass mediation to moments of networked interaction. Within the themes in Chapter 6, however, the analysis has combined deduction with induction allowing the rich emergent themes from within the conversation with the children to feed into the analysis. Note for instance the analysis of children's perception of harm and negative spaces. Initially

given a small space under the theoretical focus in the interview guide, on critical literacies, the children, in many cases took the conversation to perceptions and anticipations of harm and more interestingly, came up with judgements on their peers' experiences and perceptions of negative spaces on SNSs. In the inductive component of Chapter 6 therefore, there was space for this theme to emerge and form a major part of the analysis, because ignoring it would mean accommodating one of the major weaknesses of deduction.

In this chapter, I began with concepts in the interpretative contract that have shaped the methodological decisions made in this project. I highlighted the importance of the theoretical agenda in the empirical work undertaken in this project, that is, that this was not a project which was designed to be exploratory and inductive but rather one in which the research instruments were theory-led and one where the agenda from the outset was to investigate the relevance of the insights of a certain field of research in another moment of mediation. I conclude by reminding us of the contract once again – in its inherent mutuality of texts and readers, of genre and interpretation and of literacies and legibilities (see Figure 4.1 earlier). It is with this contract in mind, and the overarching theoretical agenda it represents, that I now move on to the four empirical chapters in this thesis, the first of which, Chapter 5, contextualises interpretation within a network of resources and restraints.

5. The resources and limits of interpretation

By grouping together readers as different as the well-dressed man perched on a library ladder in a book-lined study and the ragged young boy sprawled across a pile of discarded newspapers in the street, Kertesz is able to suggest that whatever the differences and merits of the materials they peruse, all are engaged in some form of the engrossing behaviour through which print is transformed into a world. (Radway, 1984, p. 49)

Introduction

The children who appear in this chapter all look forward and back, make decisions, change them with or without thought and participate in a textual form from a variety of locations. (please refer to the appendices for background information on the children) Their interpretative work is not a simple sum total of their technical expertise and the navigability of the way in which SNSs are structured, for the metaphors they employ to represent these sites, and the resources they use from their contexts when online, make for a complex dynamic as the text is transformed into a world, as Radway expresses above. And like her instance of readers hailing from very different locations in life, the text gains meaning in a variety of contexts. Empirical analysis of the contextual shaping of interpretation is a rich and potentially limitless pursuit, and would demand an ethnographic approach, even if one wishes to avoid calling it a real ethnography, where looking forward and backwards and making decisions find location in space and time. Unsurprisingly, the children whose interpretative work I investigate in this thesis lead very diverse lives. They go to different schools across London, and then return to different homes, within which Facebook finds space in different ways. Many stories lie in between the extremes I highlight. What is of interest is not only that the contexts of use are divergent, but that these divergences both resource and limit their interface with

the text. Kelly¹³ is 16, and her attempts to evade a stalker father for quite some time have long provided her with the sharp expertise of navigating through and altering intricate privacy settings on her own, on a Facebook which is “like being on the streets”.

In this chapter I explore the diversities in the practices of use within which a specific website or genre is approached and engaged with. These practices are sometimes limited by contextual hurdles and sometimes resourced by them; sometimes resources are restraints or the other way round. To trace the precise link, as Radway indicates in the quote that follows, between textual structure, the exact interpreted meaning and the role of context in this all, is demanding and perhaps not entirely feasible. It is, however, a necessary task to link these all together. Radway summarises the reception theorists’ perspectives on meaning as ‘the product of a complex transaction between an inert textual structure, composed of verbal signifiers, and an actively productive reader, who constructs those signifiers as meaningful signs on the basis of previously learned interpretative procedures and cultural codes. Although the reader often attempts to construe the text by referring to the codes and strategies she believes the author intended her to use, nothing in the text constrains her to do so, nor, if she does, is she necessarily successful’ (Radway, 1984, p. 52). As this chapter reveals, not all privileges group together, although sometimes they may do; not all hurdles and restraints function in a negative way necessarily; offline relationships and social ties shape online relationships; and context affords diversity in the way gaps are filled. In the next chapter, I move a step forward from context to differences and similarities in the way the text is made sense of, and in the chapter that follows I delve deeper into the specific tasks at the heart of such sense making.

¹³ All names (of children and of schools) have been anonymised to protect identities)

Locations

At first glance, while this introductory empirical chapter might appear purely descriptive, I intend to highlight contrasts within which the internet finds varying (and sometimes contrasting) significance. My interviews were with 60 children, between the ages of 11 and 18, with approximately 15 children in each age group of 11-12, 13-14, 15-16 and 17-18 years old. Half were boys and half girls, and the bulk of the sample came from two state schools in London, one of which was a media and arts speciality school. The notice boards of the schools¹⁴ I visited were the first indicators of the striking diversity in the locations of our ‘digital natives’, all of whom are resourced by moderately well-equipped ICT classrooms, almost all of whom are tech-savvy and all of whom bring different things to the text and take back different things with them. As I walked into the lush green grounds of Greenwood Academy, an elite, academically selective private boys school on the outskirts of London, the first things which struck me were the numerous deadlines being announced all over notice boards – boys were preparing for clarinet sessions, rugby matches were coming up, rehearsals for plays were being held in all earnest, music training sessions were on. On meeting the Master, I was led by one of the teachers of the senior school through the school’s gallery of Oxbridge entrants. On meeting the boys, conversations in French literature, family careers in law, the Home Office, the Foreign Services and a range of Oxbridge medic aspirations sustained interesting, intriguing interviews. Greenwood boys benefit from excellent campus-wide network access, disk space and a very good student-to-computer ratio. They are considered by the school to be among the academic best in the country. Music is one of the key strengths of Greenwood, with boys participating in a series of events across the year, in wind bands, jazz ensembles, guitar ensembles and more.

¹⁴ Names of schools have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Contrast this with the notice boards at Fins High, a media specialist state school in London – students being instructed to never bring fireworks into school premises, or knives or stones, and students being requested to report peers who do bring these into school. This was a world of subsidized meals, not galleries of Oxbridge achievers, for as an ICT teacher explained to me, as I had just finished attending a staff meeting, the challenge on most school days is not to ensure that the children leave with academic brilliance, but to lend a sensitive ear for those that often need one, or to ensure that teachers have their fingers on the pulse of parents who are not always the most resourceful or supportive. Later, in conversation with the children here, as they took me into their many winding school corridors, eager to explore my Netbook and to tell me stories of a new computer they might be getting for free next year, I learnt of many disabled parents, unemployed parents, abusive parents and computers that were shared between more people than there were days in the week (see appendices).

A school evaluation report¹⁵ for Fins High states that the vast majority of its students hail from a range of minority ethnic heritages with many only beginning to learn English. The number of students who qualify for a free school meal is indeed high as is the proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The school, with a majority of non-white students, especially Turkish and Somali students, celebrated black history month at the time I visited for interviews. Flags of countries with non-white majorities hung over the lunch area, and across the school students were encouraged to promote and support racial equality, to stand up against discrimination of any kind. It was here that I met Alice, 11, who has long been waiting for computer access, and also Adil, 15, who had been flooded with a range of gadgets, including an iPhone from which he logged onto Facebook, during class, as we spoke sitting in a corner. School evaluation reports state

¹⁵ For preserving the anonymity of schools and children, the source of these evaluation reports is omitted from this thesis.

further, that most students join the school with below average literacy and communication levels. However, despite the fact that overall standards at the end of Years 9 and 11 are under average, most students do well, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Around the same time, girls from Chilton, a reputed, independent girls' day school in London, where sixth form class sizes range from six to eight students, showed me photos of holidaying on Facebook, how being on holiday left them in the double bind of feeling left out and disconnected from friends at home who put up home photos when spending holidays at home, and being excited to display their latest holiday. Chilton girls, like their Greenwood counterparts, work towards a rich and varied cultural programme, as performances by their clarinet, guitar and string groups as well as by the orchestra and jazz groups are put up regularly. It was Diana, 13, a Chilton teen, who reminded me that there was really no way out of Facebook, as that was what girls talked about at school, and being left without a social network account was a recipe for social isolation.

Girls and boys at Hill High, a state school in Greenwich, were working out ways in which to break through their school's stringent ban on social networks at school, as one whispered in my ear that the controls could all be changed from their ICT teacher's office, where we sat and chatted. Many explained to me their everyday lives within which Facebook was both the fun hobby next to eating and sleeping, and where mums and dads often left the children to their own devices in dealing with problems online. Hill High too has a higher percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and for whom English is at best an additional language compared to many other schools. Like Fins High, the proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is above average. Often, these difficulties are behavioural, social and/or emotional.

The privilege that was evident in my interviews with pre-teens and teens who displayed an impressive knowledge of Germanic languages and literatures, or in the children attending Spring's Hollow, an American system school just outside of London, contrasted with the calculations and part-time jobs being balanced by those their age, in different schools, for instance at Hill High. And yet, the similarities – in networking, in reaching out, in seeking stories and narratives of what happens in a friend's intriguing status update, the compulsion, often, to join 'silly' groups just to support friends and to show them that they agree with them, the confusion at mass-scale events that lead to no clear ways of 'real world' engagement from online button-clicking, and the shared concerns about 'paedos and pervs' out there – stood out. In the next chapter, where I seek to discern similarities and differences in children's interfacing with the text, I focus on how children approach the texts differently as they grow up, and in a sense, the analysis could perhaps focus on socio-economic status, and gender, and a range of other attributes. And fittingly perhaps, in this chapter, I seek to foreground the locations from which my 'readers' approach the text – for, as Radway's quote at the start of this chapter highlights, the clarinet-playing boys read the same text as the girl working weekends, and yet the differences and similarities in their interpretative work cannot quite simply be mapped onto this or any other axes of difference so easily.

Resources, restraints

Eleven-year-old Alice comes from a recently broken home, where she now lives with a disabled mother who is unable to feed herself, and a stepfather who is not too nice to her. She explains to me how recent events around her locality and near her school, Fins High, prompted her mother to encourage her to take up self-defence lessons. Her brother, she tells me, "is a bad boy" and she does not have that many new friends. Alice's key barrier, in her words, seems to be a lack of access – to

opportunities to socialise, to a computer for herself, and to friends. Delia, at 16, comes, in turn, from a family with many members and there is “not a moment of quiet” at home, similar also to Sophie’s (14) story. For Sophie, however, £100 shopping each week or at least each fortnight is guaranteed by her “nice mum”, as she shows me an expensive new phone. Delia has a brother in Afghanistan, serving in the armed forces and her mother is a child-minder to six children who stay with them, and Delia regularly has to work at weekends, at a local beautician’s, to earn money for herself. Unsurprisingly perhaps, for Delia, Facebook is an opportunity to connect to friends she cannot often go out with, while for Sophie, it is a smooth transition from school to social things to phone. Access seems a surprising problem for many – Cathy, 16, must access the internet from a friend’s place and yet has a strikingly busy and regularly updated Facebook; Bob, 15, has not had an internet connection in the past three months. Olisha, 17, lives with a stay-at-home mother and a cousin who works and supports them financially. The implications for her though, are that her cousin ‘spies’ on her Facebook profile, and has recently reported her to be hanging out with boys and wearing shorts, to her mother. Olisha disconnects often and yet returns for when her friends are on the site. She tells me:

“...if I don’t accept, they keep going on about it, and my mum says, oh, have you got something to hide that you’re not accepting them, so once, not long ago, like last month, I came back from town and it was hot, so obviously we were wearing shorts and stuff, and one of my cousins is not allowed to wear shorts, only a skirt and she had shorts on, and it was our last day, so my mum let me have a drink, and we were all family, and I was just sitting down, and then I put on my Facebook the pictures, and my cousin calls my mum and says I’ve got rude pictures on Facebook, and the thing is I wouldn’t do that anyway, knowing I’ve got all my family on there, and all my friends there.”

Sania, 15, seems at peace with her boundaries – like her peers, she loves singing and dancing in particular, but, unlike her peers, she is not allowed to sing or dance in public and is not allowed to participate in any of the school’s performances. She has some troubles at home, with both parents

unemployed and a family of many siblings. And yet, she reminds me, her Facebook has discreet walls of privacy, for ‘some things are private’ and not for her parents and an orthodox family to either find out or see, although she is “not doing anything bad”.

These restraints are different across the children’s stories – for some, access is difficult, for some, concentration is impeded by domestic and financial turbulence, for all, spaces within the site have divergent personal meanings, as Alice joins cancer research groups in memory of a friend, or as Delia supports those at war as she waits for her brother to return. Chip, too, at 16, is eager to explore and participate in his ethnic community and talks to me about BBC (British Born Cypriots), a group on Facebook whose activities he seems eager to participate in. These stories seem different in some ways from the children at Greenwood, Spring’s Hollow or Chilton. Access is no longer a problem, stories of financial trouble are replaced by ones of affluence, of parental know-how and support for their child online, as Fritz, 15, tells me how he “just decided to get a new laptop”, and in contrast, Alice waits for her first computer to arrive with barely concealed excitement:

Interviewer: “Okay, have you got a computer of your own?”

Alice: “No, I am getting one for Christmas.”

Interviewer: “Getting a new one for Christmas, from whom?”

Alice: “Um well, I think it came up when I was sick, so basically I saw the council because it got stuck on the door, and then I got thirteen grand, and then they said that I could get some money out of that, if it’s for anything to do with school, so I just said that I would get a laptop for school use and homework.”

Contrastingly, Jeremy, Lee, Ryan and Fontaine come from affluent families, where the internet is one of a range of other activities. Arthur, at 11, spends some substantial time “taking a break” from computers and the internet, amidst cricket, drums, rugby and clarinet, and so he reads on his way to school and back, every day, from Kent to Greenwood and back. All children at Greenwood, Chilton and Spring’s Hollow tell me stories of first computers many years ago, or laptops and computers

both or at least one dedicated for them. Rishona, 13, at Chilton, speaks to me of pressures on her as her whole family has been to Oxford and she is convinced she will not make it, and must work extra hard for languages, drama and literature all through her teens to have a chance.

I conducted the interviews as the children went online, logged on to my tiny Netbook. In many cases, my slow internet connection perplexed and bored them; for the younger children the gadget itself was an object of curiosity and amusement, and as I waited outside classrooms or during break times, groups of students, especially at the state schools, would surround me, drawing parallels with iPods and games consoles, and asking me difficult questions about contracts and bills for the built-in mobile internet. The fact that interviews had to be done on my laptop was due to the lack of access at all the schools to SNSs. While all interviews were conducted during ICT lessons, and there were almost always computers to spare, SNSs were blocked on school computers – diverging explanations for which were often provided by the teens, and always, in despair. Kelly told me how Hill High had had the whole borough shut down Facebook access, for anyone in the area; this didn't sound quite right because that would potentially mean nobody in the borough of Greenwich would be able to access the site, which was clearly not the case. At Fins High, Sophie and Janet told me in whispers that the school had blocked access to social networks after a teacher was found logging on to the site instead of teaching. Others at Fins High told me how students had been discovered accessing porn online and so the site had been blocked. Bob, Kelly's classmate at Hill High, was confident, however, that the problem could easily be resolved from where we were sitting – in the office of the ICT teacher, where his computer could easily be hacked into to give access to Facebook to the students. The confidence – apparent in the contrasting stories in circulation on the reasons for blocking the site and of being able to undo the block, in a very short time – was striking.

Most children I spoke to had access to their own computers or laptops, some shared with siblings, some with parents. Some of the youngest shared passwords and all access details with their parents – all of these raise important points on privacy and relationships in the offline world and reflect stories about the text that the children have constructed from experience and environments. Some transferred seamlessly between multiple gadgets, and indeed took pride in owning the latest technology or at least being fully aware of what was available in the market; others lacked basic access and internet facilities and these were the cases in which a network of friendships got used to somehow manage a social networking profile and keep it updated. Alice, who had been waiting for a computer, Janet, who shared a computer with six others, Bob, who had had no access to the internet for over three months –are on one end of the range, with Adil, Sophie, Fritz, Neil and many others on the other, who are able to go online from a range of different gadgets.

Perhaps it is indeed a case of having more to communicate when one communicates more, and having more time to invest in games the more one plays. Kristy, 18, as she chats to me when we go online on my Netbook, cannot help but update her status message three times, stating that she is being interviewed for Facebook in school; and Munir, 18, cannot stop playing the Crazy Taxi game for a moment, even during the interview. Ultimately, he has to be told to turn the volume down. On the other end of the range are children like Cole, 11, who, despite a range of privileges, resources and access options, hardly goes online even once or twice a fortnight, and even then hardly communicates online. Or perhaps, the case of Julia, 11, is interesting, as she tells me a number of times how she has just one Facebook friend, her aunt, with whom she chats for 30 minutes every day. And hence, different uses of the site emerge from contrasting conditions of access, but also contrasting shaping effects of contextual diversities. Among the pre-teens, almost everyone speaks of PlayStations, games consoles and games sites, while for the older children, Facebook in its

entirety becomes more significant perhaps than a range of different gadgets put together. The multiplatform nature of the site brings together the affordances of the photo-sharing application Picasa, as Diana, 13, points out, or of MSN Chat, as almost every child notes that this is the world of often considered disruptively addictive yet attractive games where one might lose anything from one's head to one's imaginary fields, crops and pets. In a convergence of divergent rationales for addictive games, pre-teen Arthur tells me how "it's bad" (Farmville) because you lose crops and money, but still need to go on playing, and how 16-year-old Cathy tells me how quizzes, games and interviews on Facebook are, after all, what give it life.

It is difficult to map teens' lives on to the lives of their peers in the schools they go to. At Fins High, for instance, where many like Alice struggle to find online access, or come from troubled homes, there are those like Sophie, who tell me how their father is a delivery man and their mother a nanny, but that they have "lots of money" and that almost everyone in their family has their own computer. In fact, that is especially why she likes her dad's job, she says. And, as I mentioned earlier, at Fins High, Adil stands out, with his expensive phone and mobile internet. Interestingly, some resources are restraints and some restraints resources. Rishona's intellectual capital keeps returning to our conversation as pressure to perform, and she meticulously keeps her high-performing family out of her Facebook pages. Alice's patience in helping her disabled mother with her laptop and her everyday chores is reflected in her patience with introducing her grandfather to SNSs, for instance, and Olisha's problematic cousin in many ways compels her to subvert authority and to work out newer ways on the interface to have fun, control settings and not get into trouble over it. The contrasts between the lawyer or academic parents of the Greenwood or Chilton children and the unemployed or irregularly employed working-class parents of some Fins High or Hill High children map onto the media environments these children operate within, but this mapping is not always

direct and easy, and nor does it explain the divergent ways in which restraints in contexts are often mobilized as resources.

Relationships

The text seems to mediate offline and online relationships for the children in a range of ways. At one level there are stories of connection online and offline. Some share their activities on the site with parents and siblings; some keep them out. Some bottle up concerns which they do not feel able to share with family while others find a way in which to communicate them. Diana and Ashley, both 13, keep their family at a distance when it comes to their activities online and yet value their families' opinions and support when they both encounter 'scary' situations. Ashley tells me with confidence how she was allowed to get a Facebook profile only on the condition that she would tell her parents immediately if anything weird happened. And then there are those like Alan or Sophia on one end of the range, where they share everything from their emails and passwords with their mothers, and those like Alison on the other, who seem more disconnected and isolated in the face of rude messages and bullying online than one would perhaps imagine. In a mix of valuing and managing online and offline relationships, Diana tells me, she would not want her mother, whom she thinks the world of, to think her daughter was out doing "wild things". Diana keeps a distance from her cousin on Facebook, who, despite being "really nice", is out at wild parties. Some of the children come from disturbed domestic situations, where Alice quietly tells me how it is difficult for her to share her experiences at home, where she does not get along with her stepfather, or her brother, and where her mother is sometimes more demanding with her disability than the 11-year-old is able to cope with. With a group of three close friends, she 'hangs out' in the local park but is sometimes restless for more social activities. Her Facebook shows almost no stories of connection. Those her

age, at almost all of the schools, are eager to make new connections and establish new relationships with slightly older children than them, to get into groups and societies run and managed by older children, higher up in the social ladder. These attempts, sometimes to reach out with genuine care and affection, sometimes to enmesh oneself in a desirable social network – all reveal engagement and participation in relationships of worth. Diana also tells me how she likes doing things for friends and volunteers to edit their profile pictures to make them look pretty. She says “it’s basically, it’s...um, you do, you choose a picture that you maybe you don’t think you look very nice, but could look nice if edit it a bit, and then you can put different, like, you can make it...the texture, you can change that. You can make you glow a bit, you can make you a bit more matte, if you’re shining. You know, stuff like that. You can just make it look nicer, basically.” Some, in contrast, remove themselves from friendship networks and prioritise family relationships – two instances come to mind. One is Alice, who reaches out to her grandfather on Facebook. She previously spoke to me of dysfunctional parental and sibling ties, and tells me also how there should be no age limit on Facebook for older people (which there isn’t), and how older people should go online. The other is Julia, also a pre-teen, who tells me the most surprising story of all, that she has just one friend on Facebook, her aunt, with whom she chats for at least 30 minutes every day. And some carry family relationships into the site, as Janet tells me stories of her mother helping her join a cancer research group on the site and how both mother and daughter ran a marathon organized by the group, making a ‘real world’ attempt to make a difference after having clicked on a button together, online.

The point with these divergent stories is to show that the site is approached by children with a range of different resources – contrast Sophia and Alan’s resources as they share their world with their parents, but also the restraints of having their accounts monitored regularly, with Alison’s inability to share her problems with anyone at home, or Alice’s dilemmas as well. It is also interesting to see

how friend relationships are initiated, as Arthur and Cole make many small attempts to join big boys' groups, how these relationships are graded – not all of Rishona's friends get listed as siblings or partners, only the closest do, and making this discursively apparent in the text is clearly important, how these relationships are managed, both online (as in engaging only with a distance with a cousin Olisha wishes to keep at bay) and offline (as Diana reflects on what her mother might think if she saw her friends joking about smoking pot, which, she clarified, they do not, really). The text mediates these relationships in a sense – by offering avenues for joint interaction and reaching out but also techniques for shutting out those who they wish to shut out. But the text also mediates by posing a world of creative, explorative and collaborative opportunities punctuated with tensions and complexities, where some children bring parental resources with them, and some do not.

Talents, aspirations, ambitions

This section highlights stories of contrasts where talents intersect with socio-economics and map onto divergent ways in which children engage with the site. Supported by a range of specialist training opportunities, the boys at Greenwood spoke to me of rugby, clarinet and guitar sessions, and many chances to hone skills in computer training. Neal and Samuel, in their sixth form, explain to me how they put together their own computers – something born out of dissatisfaction with what was for sale. Later, when they describe to me how Myspace differs from Facebook, the precision and clarity in their description is not surprising as they distinguish a difference in the two different 'meanings' of the two sites – “There's much less of a modularized system in a way, it's all boxes all over the place, so you have a bunch of free text, whereas with Facebook, when you're setting up Facebook, it says, what kind of music do you like, and in that box, you write your music, and then it says what kinds of films you like and you write that and then it says stuff like that, whereas Myspace

is much more free and therefore you get much more junk pages and people write stupid things on their pages, and it doesn't have the same meaning as Facebook does." Arthur and Cole receive special training for rugby three times a week and are often too tired to go online, the rest of the time being taken up by Greenwood music lessons and academic work and travel to and from school.

This contrasts with Alice, the same age as Arthur and Cole, who are able to choose one co-curricular activity after school. Alice is growing up in a neighbourhood where her personal safety is often at risk, children at her school are regularly instructed to report any peers who carry knives or fireworks with them, and when Alice wants to take up a hobby, her mother convinces her to take up martial arts and self-defence. This is unlike Arthur, who at 11 can spend some substantial time "taking a break" from computers and the internet, and so he reads on his way to school and back, every day, from Kent to Dulwich; and Alice, as we saw, cannot wait to finally get her own computer. Alice is an avid football player and supports the team almost all of her school support – Arsenal – and she gently reminds me that unlike most of the other girls, she does not watch, but plays. Her peers at Fins High – Sophia, Alan, Evan and Adil – all enjoy football and sometimes even skateboarding, but with very little to speak of in terms of lessons or training.

This contrasts with the girls from Chilton, who, at 13, are into a range of post-school activities, which, for Rishona, are not too distant from her plans to read literature at the University of Oxford. Diana, Rishona and Ashley speak to me of a range of interests in philosophy, plays and theatre, mixed with which is their love for nice holidays. Their Facebook pages are swamped with photos, with instances of reaching out to each other, collecting photos of each other from blackberries and mobiles, commenting on how pretty their friends look. And so, Diana's problem is different from many of her peers, but shared by her friends at Chilton – "for example on holidays, because then

you just go away, and my friends meet up during holidays and stuff, and you'd totally be left out with Facebook, especially if...especially on holidays, because I'm never here, and they always go out, and then it's like I get all these pictures, and then you can feel really left out with it, you know." At Spring's Hollow, the children follow the American curriculum and come from international families as I speak with children from Norwegian, French, Algerian, German, Korean, Dutch and Japanese heritages. Fritz's aspirations are to be a Varsity rugby player, and his Facebook reflects his interests as well as his civic engagement, triggered by personal experiences. Safer Internet is Fritz's priority and passion, as he recounts to me the complexities of online relationships that grow into bullying, and then shows me how passionately he has fixed anti-bullying stickers on his pages, and unlike most of his peers, he can explain to me how the 'cause' of Safer Internet and Safer Internet Day works.

Clarity about aspirations and ambitions seemed instinctive to some of the boys at Greenwood, as for instance, Lee, an exchange student from Hong Kong, where his father is high up in the police force, explained to me his plans to be a dermatologist. The reason was more instrumental than intellectual, for this 14-year-old believes that cosmetic surgery brings plenty of money these days. Asif, 14, at Fins High, is confident and clear about his ambitions – he wants to own a fried chicken shop. These aspirations make for complex groupings on Facebook, as Asif joins a number of fried chicken groups to work out how owners set up businesses, and also ones where he is marking his attendance to support classmates, or as Fritz joins a range of anti-bullying groups, but perhaps with an engaged and committed intent. Delia's interests in groups showing respect to British soldiers fighting in Afghanistan or Alice's interests in trying to work out a difficult to comprehend group supporting breast cancer research, all represent avenues these children have sought out based on life experiences, and that perhaps is a counter to the claim that they are disengaged. Adil, in Year 10, and

with access to a range of gadgets, has begun to work out his ethnic identity amidst London's cosmopolitanism, and for him, a football fan group from his parents' native country is the way in which he converges his primary passions for football with a growing interest in exploring diasporic events and activities. Perhaps the same could be said of Chip's recent interests in Cypriot cultural groups on the site. For those amongst the children who have resources available to them, Sophie, for instance, is interested in 'shopping' as a hobby she seriously pursues, and her shopping stories from London high streets form the content of many commented-upon and fun status message updates, which I see, develop their own narratives and bring many together on a single thread, including those who are unable to have 'shopping' for a hobby.

The challenge of having to protect oneself from one's own parent resourced Kelly, in a sense, to rapidly figure out the ups and down of Facebook streets. Over the course of the interview she revealed both a perfect awareness of privacy norms and changes, mirrored in the steps she follows when adding people on her friends' lists, and a disdain for those who cannot quite manage these so easily. Unlike Kelly, who has had to teach herself the rules of the street, Diana, on encountering "this really scary stalker situation" sought out her parents to help her deal with it. She shares the same concerns as Kelly around potentially risky spaces in Facebook, but draws her resources from those around her, as she herself displays a rather different level of confidence. Arthur, 11, who goes to an academically selective boys' school, does not find much time to go online on SNSs as his spare time is taken up by rugby and clarinet practice sessions, but his reasons are rather different from those of Alice's, for instance, who finds it difficult to access a computer for herself, or her 11-year-old peer Ryan's, whose parents are in and out of employment and who finds accessing computers difficult, unless at school. Samuel, 17, who comes with a "keen interest in computer science and photoshopping" and pursues these specializations at a private boys' school outside of London, is on

his way towards making sophisticated software, someday. He tells me how he made his own computer: “I decided that probably my computer was getting a bit old, and I decided it would be great fun to build a computer”. He explains to me in detail how he has been resourced to pursue his talents in all things to do with gadgets, and explains the intricacies of the way Facebook is built using impressive jargon. Olisha, who is finishing with a state school in inner London, explains to me how Facebook is a site of struggle for her, to find her own space, as her mother monitors her conversations with the world outside her home. She tried to design a profile that reflected not only what she was able to do with her social life but also a space which was unconstrained.

Empirical findings

In this chapter we have seen how challenges are sometimes resources and how some apparent resources are restraints. Children who have access to a range of different gadgets and are able to go online in a variety of ways are not necessarily the ones who engage with Facebook the most. Offline relationships with friends, siblings and especially parents mediate the nature of engagement with the text, this being evident in the degree of openness online, the kind of expressions and self-control exercised and the amount of trust placed on engaging with people in the online world. For some, the text often serves as an alternative space for having fun, for those who have offline interests, talents or aspirations that cannot, for life circumstances, be fulfilled. The text, for some with privileges in the ‘real’ world to pursue their talents and ambitions, serves as a smooth continuation of these offline interests that are carried into their engagement with the online. The text for some is also often a route of escape and respite for those who work within and sometimes against boundaries and prohibitions at home. The text mediates relationships – by opening up pathways for collaboration, interaction and engagement; but it also offers resources for disconnecting from those

one wishes to avoid in the offline world. The text opens out an array of imaginative, curious and cooperative prospects where children experiment but some bring in the comfort and stability of parental relationships, while some do not or indeed cannot. Domestic turmoil or peace, financial resources, individual talents, interests, life experiences and the texture of one's relationships matter as we interface with the text. And yet, mapping contexts onto use is not the easiest of tasks and perhaps it is not entirely desirable either.

Conclusion

In this chapter my primary point was to tease out the complexities of resources and restraints where almost every resource could be a restraint and vice versa. These stories were neither surprising nor unique, and they told us nothing more and nothing less than the fact that the media, like all texts, are appropriated in a context-dependent manner, that the lived conditions of everyday life tint interfaces with the media or that the media being embedded in everyday life offer spaces of frustration, gloom and dismay as well as a space for escape and experimentation. These stories do in some senses indicate the variety of locations from where my 'readers' in this thesis approach a common, shared generic form. Over the course of this chapter and the next, many similar stories will come up. Most of these are easily anticipated, the contrasts in contexts clear, at least in theory, to most of us. Alice, Diana, Adil, Sophia and their peers are all articulate and intelligent young people, they are all up to date with the latest moves that alter profile pages on SNSs and they are all eager to share their stories with me. As they go online each day – either on a single computer shared with parents and many siblings, as 14-year-old Janet does, or, like 11-year-old Alice, on a laptop from which a disabled parent works, or perhaps like 13-year-old Sophie, on the trendiest mobile in their pockets – their contexts tell contrasting stories of deprivation and luxury, happiness and gloom, domestic problems and stable families, no hobbies and many specialized activities, of confidence and fear, and

of stable ambitions and confused aspirations. It is in the context of this all that I move on to identifying the range and nature of tasks they perform as they interface with the genre, reminding myself that these children are not at all part of a homogeneously happy group, embedded with unbounded optimism within the delightful world of the online, with equal technical and critical expertise and domestic resources at their command, all the time.

6. Heterogeneity in interpretation

Introduction

In Chapter 5 we noted the largely unsurprising point that the contexts in which the media are appropriated and given meaning to remain significant, symbolically and otherwise. But more importantly, we noticed that it is not always easy to map practices onto contexts for an enabling contextual factor might become a road block in other respects or be accompanied by other axes of uncertainty and hindrance. The reverse, we noticed, is also true. So a dysfunctional relationship with a parent, when potentially limiting a child by placing a range of social and emotional hurdles in their way, might resource them in a way by forcing them to work out other avenues of help and support and letting them explore the online world with enthusiasm, although clearly this is not always so. The personal is meaningful – as an 11-year-old, who has failed, like her older counterparts, to ‘get’ the sense of civic engagement online, or to see where it leads exactly, persists with relentless enthusiasm in joining support groups online, on losing her best friend to a terminal illness. Privilege – financial and cultural – shapes the distinctly different ways in which some others interface the genre, as the site becomes a space to display photos from expensive holidays, to go online from a range of different devices and often as a consequence, to reflect on what the different affordances of these platforms are. Which possibilities are taken up and which are ignored is shaped to a great extent by the locations from which the text is approached. As we know, from many decades of research with media audiences, these approaches are classed, gendered and always shaped by individual experiences.

In this chapter, I take this point forward – developing the range of similarities and differences that result from divergent interactions with the text as I focus on heterogeneity in interpretation. I set out to spot points in disagreement and consensus, where the purpose is to discern not only whether patterns of interpretative work differ as children grow up and go through teenage years, but which of these patterns are significant and why might they matter at all? Doubtless, this same collection of interviews could have been analysed and interpreted for divergence and consensus following gender, class and a range of social axes, which are intersectional – and this intersectionality becomes clear in what follows, in the many stories of exception that punctuate the identification of noticeable patterns.

The task in this chapter therefore is to move a step forward from the contextualization of use that went before, as I seek patterns in engagement with the text. In the chapter that follows, I begin from these similarities and differences to reflect closely on the task of interpretation – the demands placed on it by the nature of the text, and the consequent range of responsibilities it involves. This trajectory – of reflecting on the resources and limits placed on interpretative work, by contextual diversity, the tracing of difference and similarities and the subsequent clarification of the nature of tasks involved in interpretative work, developed over Chapters 5, 6 and 7 – all builds up to a conceptual analysis presented in Chapter 8, where I reflect on the conceptual tools with which I embarked on this project.

Authors, other readers and stories about the text

At first glance, it might appear unusual to speak of the ‘author’ in the context of a site where so much is user-generated. And yet, while themes in the latter half of this chapter do address the creativity and collaboration involved in interfacing with Facebook, I begin with the question of an

authorial presence, for question of overall syntax, structure, controls, privacy, norms and conventions do indicate a level of ownership and authorship of the text within which the user-generation of content is meshed. So, who is ‘behind’ the text, and how is it important for those who interface with it? What are the ways in which others who also engage with the text are evaluated? Do perceptions of the author shape the expectations constructed around the text? In what follows I highlight perceptions of an authorial presence amongst these children, a vital observation that indicates the degree of trust placed in the text and also confidence in engaging with it.

Perceptions of authorial presence

Eleven-year-old Sophia speaks of how “some clever people” whom she does not know control Facebook and Myspace. These clever people are not people she trusts necessarily, for they “can hack into all the information where you live”. Similarly, 12-year-old Shakira points out how “Facebook knows” everything, especially “the calculation about who might know whom and all of that”. This is also voiced, perhaps in clearer terms, by 12-year-old Alan, who says “Facebook checks your MSN to see if it’s the same information that MSN has that you’re putting on your Facebook, and if it’s not, I don’t think they will let you make it. You have to give the same age, the same date of birth, the same as on your MSN.” Pre-teens use a range of discursive tropes to locate an unknown author somewhere behind it all. The author is powerful, distant, unknown, and as Sophia or Shakira reveal, represents someone who knows everything and can use this knowledge for a range of ends. But sometimes this is also a perceived solution to problems. As Sophia points out later, if anybody is nasty to anybody on the site, “they completely shut the whole programme down from your computer”. This trust, mixed with a vision of ‘someone’ behind the text as an unknown presence, also places the author in a position of privilege, which, in what 11-year-old Arthur points out, is apparently just technical, but really stands for a position that is almost intimidating. As he says,

Facebook knows what to suggest to whom and why, and “it’s all computer, so it’s all high tech and all that”. And similarly, perhaps, Thomas, also 11, has accepted that the games work because it’s always “a game you can’t ever win”. In a striking contrast to hopes around user-generated content, Julia, also 11, places the power away from the user and points out to her classmate, Thomas, how although you can write anything on the site, “you can’t change Facebook” for “Facebook doesn’t belong to us”. When asked if there was a company called Facebook, she is confused and cannot work out an answer.

In contrast, early teens are able to work out that there is probably no singular creator of the site but that there are ‘people’ or that ‘Facebook’ knows, who can disable accounts, or find out at a glance who uses email. In that sense, they share the image of the all-knowing, and sometimes invasive author, but move beyond a singular authorial figure. As 13-year-old Anna points out, “it’s not like there’s a man sitting with a machine and seeing everyone’s profiles”, but “they have a system which knows what to suggest”. There is a focus shift in interviews with pre-teens on what *they* do on the site – connecting, disconnecting, forming groups, ignoring and sharing – rather than a focus in the conversations with their younger counterparts on what might happen to them as they go online. There are moments of uncertainty though about the encoding of conventions, as Diana, 13, notices that she is receiving adverts on cosmetic products (having recently discussed cosmetics with friends on her ‘wall’) but insists that “it is quite random”. But when pushed, she reflects, and says, while she has never thought about it, “they might look at your age and see how old you are” and suggest products accordingly. The image of the unknown person with the big computer disappears but is replaced by a largely unknown, and significantly powerful system behind the text. As 14-year-old Catherine points out, “Facebook can calculate how many times people looked at your profile, how many pictures you are tagged in and stuff like that”. A consensus with pre-teens on a singular person

behind the text is visible in 13-year-old Rishona's perceptions, where "the head of Facebook can see everything", but this, she insists on clarifying, is nothing unique to Facebook, because at school, too, "the school can see anything you've done on your computer – not your home computer, but the school computer".

This image of this unknown author persists in conversations with the mid-teens, although this is less discursively apparent. Contrast Sophia's and Alan's visions of a singular authorial figure behind the text with the 13-year-olds speaking of a system somewhere rather than a clever person with access to lots of high tech. Mid-teens, at 15 or 16, present interesting comparisons of textual affordances, sometimes comparing the encoding of Facebook, Myspace and Bebo for affordances, often working out that a team somewhere borrows and copies ideas off each other. The image here shows a gradual shift from one of unquestionable power and singular authority to a system of people, fallible, and predictably stealing ideas from each other. There is a greater degree of reflection, as Martin, 15, points out that there is a way in which these sites send 'suggestions', based on "where you live, and your network – like Dulwich or Greenwich", but that it is "useful, as well as scary". When asked why it was scary, he responds, saying, "I know I've given all the information, but...I didn't realize that they could do so much with the information".

The 'power' of the author almost disappears for older teens who make no references to a strange and unknown singular figure behind the text. For them, a commercial awareness of the genre, and the commercial nature of its being, become explicit and even justified. They are opinionated on what the expertise of the 'brands' are and that those designing them balance multiple demands and pressures. Eighteen-year-old Samuel points out how "everyone appreciates that they have commercial pressures on them, and it is an ad-based site". 'Them' here does not represent a scary

figure with a range of powers but perhaps a group of people out there making money and surviving in a competitive world. They are fallible too, as John, 18, points out thoughtfully – “Facebook, especially its privacy policy, does need a lot of work”. In contrast to their younger counterparts, older teens can spot where ‘they’ go wrong, as Leanne, 18, indicates, in a tone similar to John’s – “they should just do what they are good at”, when reflecting on whether Facebook should have ‘copied the chat function’ from those behind MSN.

One might safely say that an awareness of an authorial figure – someone encoding it all, behind the text, and an unconscious acceptance of generating content within restraints, even if not discursively apparent – is present throughout the span of teenage years. Older and younger teens both recognise the existence of a system that can access information at will. The divergence, however, is in the power ascribed to this system, the singularity of the system, and a subsequent variation in levels of confidence in engaging with the text.

Expectations of the author

A point needs to be made here about the ‘author’ on a website where clearly much of the content is generated by users. As my analysis earlier revealed, there are differential perceptions of an authorial figure behind the design of the text, and yet, the perception itself is clear. Pre-teens place a strikingly high amount of trust in the brand – in the author they cannot see, but who they trust, exists. Often enough, they are misconceptions and are born out of inexperience in dealing with these interfaces. Eleven-year-old Alice, who had recently lost a friend and was trying to work out how to socialise more, was convinced for instance, that Facebook offered opportunities to socialise in the offline world. She told me, that if she joined groups, “you can go on parties and stuff like that”. While this is a misconception, there are other misconceptions which involve the child placing a huge amount of

trust in the name of the unknown producer. Consider, for instance, Sophia's unswerving faith in the fate of those who might dare to disrupt moral or ethical norms on Facebook – “if they find your status offensive, they can report you and you will completely get banned from Facebook and you can't make another one.” But this faith, it seems, is also tempered by a note of caution. Alan points out that “they said on the news that if you want to make a Facebook, and you delete it, like they're going to keep the information on Facebook”, and so Sophia tells him how she makes up “some addresses and that lot, and make up names, so people can't get my real name.” Mirroring the perception of the encoder as someone powerful (in desirable and less desirable ways), expectations of the author are also pronounced.

Some of this scepticism is evident in conversations with early teens. Diana, 13, is offended that the site suggests plastic surgery to her probably because they know her gender and her age. Alison points out, with significant discomfort, “they do things discreetly”. Consequently, she doesn't have many expectations and wants to close her account soon. Ashley, 13, and hesitant to say she really dislikes this, because she finds it useful, points out how the fact that the encoders of the site know the frequency of her communication with her friends is slightly disturbing. She says “it's kind of weird because Facebook can see who you've been writing to, and it's a bit sort of creepy because say this is my friend. I haven't spoken to her in a while, so they say, um, write on her wall because you haven't done so in a long time, and it's a bit like.” On the other hand, Fritz, 14, who has joined a range of anti-bullying campaigns online and informs me of Safer Internet Day, seems to not care about data storage as much as Ashley. He says, “I don't know if they're actually reading messages or is it just the computer that notices that you haven't sent messages to each other. So, I don't know”. Lee, 13, similarly does not care if his privacy is violated by those who own the site – “that's fine. I just leave it that way”, as does Fontaine, 14 – “I think that's fine because it doesn't... Facebook

doesn't really send back mails and stuff." One might wonder then, if these fears are increasingly gendered as girls and boys become teenagers with a different set of worries and experiences. Early teens also begin to have divergent expectations of different articulations of the genre, so while they share a perception of some system behind all of this, they can distinguish, albeit with a range of misconceptions, how and why those behind Facebook have different expectations from them than those behind Myspace. Shelly, 14, is convinced that Facebook has much better privacy control compared to Myspace, "because there's better security on Facebook, yeah, because [in Myspace] you don't have a choice of saying um, you can let any person see your profile". These perceptions, are more nuanced (in being comparative) unlike those of their younger counterparts. The didactic text, it seems, is not an expectation and is usually rejected. Janet, 13, exemplifies this rejection as she says the "red and green lines" of the automatic spell check on Facebook puts her off. Shelly has high expectations of the site, and says one day "they will get everything good from Facebook, Bebo, MSN, YouTube, together and make it excellent." Janet, more sceptical, reasons "they're trying, but they're not doing it very well". Some mid-teens, when retaining an image of the author, no longer place trust, it seems, on a brand. They have worked out that there are alternative resources to turn to in case of trouble, and that there are ways in which they can anticipate and even trick the interface. They too compare across sites, so, as Delia, 16, points out, her expectations of Facebook are different from her expectations of Myspace – "Yes, Facebook is safe, but on Facebook, everyone is very friendly and there's no intention of starting any trouble. On Myspace, trouble is the main intention." Clearly, these comparisons, when nuanced and supported by anecdotal evidence, are also, often, misconceptions, something strikingly similar to their younger counterparts. Older teens display the highest amount of scepticism, having located these sites as companies 'out there', trying out new things to earn money. John, for instance, does not look to Facebook to protect his privacy but rather places the onus on himself (and others his age) to "figure out these things".

Perceiving other readers

The nature of the text demands interaction with others, and others, by necessity, are framed in accordance with personal connections to them, or in the light of stories heard from one's social networks or from the world 'out there'. Pre-teens are the most cautious and are largely sceptical about other users. 'Others' for them are usually known or unknown children 'out there' who fall prey to paedophiles or a range of dangers online because they surely must have done something wrong. As Alan tells me, children who are unaware of dangers get "hacked all the time". He sympathises with his friend – "someone hacked into her MSN and changed her password, so she couldn't log onto it no more, and they went onto her Myspace and changed her password for her Myspace, so that she couldn't get onto it, and they found out all her information and things like that." One is never sure who this 'them' is, in Alan's version of what happened, but there is a note of helplessness perhaps when he adds later, "there are clever people these days". These clever people may be those behind site design but perhaps they are other users 'out there'. And, interestingly, these others 'out there' also offer a perception of safety and comfort. Sophia is comforted by the knowledge of others like her, who are online, and want to have fun without hurting people, and that mixes with her faith in the maker of the site thus – "Other people, if they find your status offensive, they can report you and you will completely get banned from Facebook and you can't make another one." Twelve-year-old Abby hesitates but eventually accepts a friend request. She lets her mouse wander over the ignore/accept button as she says, "See look, right here. I don't know this man and he's trying to accept me as his friend – I don't know him." When I watch what she does, she clicks on accept. The mix of an awareness about things that could potentially go wrong, with the novelty of adding people, seeing what they are like and making friends can go either way, but pre-teens show a hesitance about all other users 'out there'.

Early teens seem to begin to divide other users up into a range of categories – people they want to get to know, people out there to get into trouble, and people they would perhaps wish to ‘try’ out with guarded curiosity. Fritz, 13, reflects on how people change with time, and consequently how the nature of the bonds one creates on these sites do as well. He says “you’re friends with the people, but then over time it just changes. The relationship changes, yes, and then it’s going to go bad.” They share the pre teens’ concerns about dangers that hit others, and indeed that these dangers can come up from those ‘out there’, but these others are increasingly people in their immediate circuits, and interestingly they also begin to represent a world of possibilities. So, as Rishona, 13, tells me of a person she is excited yet hesitant to add as he is a mutual friend – “If he is someone who knows someone I know, I’ll add him to see if he’s nice, if not I can always delete him can’t I?”. But others are also in competition – number of friends and visibility on the site are important considerations, as Diana tells me that “under 50 friends is just not cool” or that “I wouldn’t like everyone to know how many friends I have. It’s not like I’m ashamed of it, it’s just that I know some people have, like, 500, you know. And then they...they can judge quite easily.” “Peer pressure” she says, herself. Alison, 13, shares the concerns of her younger counterparts, but instead of being critical of those who may cause harm, is critical of her classmate James, 14, who mentions on his profile that he has three brothers. She is convinced this is a mistake, because he “should not put his life story out there”.

This critique of others who are clearly doing something wrong is different from the pre-teens’ critique of others who are out there to harm you. It is then a question of a shift in viewing positions and perspectives. In contrast to their pre-teen counterparts who are hesitant, knowing there are unknown others ‘out there’ to harm unsuspecting children, mid-teens begin to show some disdain

for those who cannot guard their privacy online and let themselves fall prey to unwanted incidents, or those who are too childish for the site. So, 16-year-old Asif tells me, “all the glitter and baubles and applications are for kids. They kill it”. Likewise, Anne, 15, is disdainful of all others, irrespective of age, who own online pets on Facebook. She says “like there’s some rubbish games that you play, you adopt a pet and you name it and you feed it and stuff, and you make it like a house or whatever”, and is clearly disgusted that even somebody’s mother plays it. They begin to use a range of ways to express that age limits should indeed hold on these sites, and that not everyone is out there to increase and maintain a responsible network of contacts. Kelly, 16, brushes aside my questions on concerns children in her school have spoken about, on privacy for instance – “well, if they add people they don’t know, they are asking for it”. Older teens seem less concerned about managing to look ‘cool’, unlike their younger counterparts, and are definitely not scared about unknown others ‘out there’ posing potential harm. Rhea, 18, is an exception amongst them as she seems worried about “paedos out there”. But, largely, a concern persists amongst some, especially it seems, those with clearly defined career aspirations, about being caught saying something unguarded. Worries about more powerful others (potential employers, teachers) on the site are evident, as John or Andrew, both 18, says how harmful it might be to a political career for instance, if inappropriate things are traced back to a teenage Facebook account.

The consensus clearly is that everyone interfaces with the site not only to engage with others, but with an awareness of those watching them. The ways in which this awareness maps out across teenage and individual experiences is different. Sometimes the concern is competing with others, as some early teens revealed; sometimes it is perceiving all others with caution and scepticism, as Sophia and her pre-teen peers say; sometimes others represent new possibilities which need to be

tested out as boundaries begin to be experimented with; and sometimes, profiles and images need management, as some older teens display.

Stories about the text

Texts and the genres they belong to are always contextualized in their cultural, historical and social locations, as, for instance, Jauss's (1982) concept of horizon of expectations reminds us. For a non-narrative and non-linear text such as this, intriguing narratives are woven together by children, some more accurate than others, some better informed, some more nuanced in comparisons, some more understanding of the encoder of it all than others. Pre-teens seem to throw up a wide range of stories collected from the media, parents and conversations around them. Most of these are stories that cause them concern, and yet propel them to try things out. Like Abby, 12, points out to me, worrying things happen with photos, but then she proceeds to show me photos she has put up herself, and which are, interestingly, not private. She says "when you're not private and you go on print screen, and you go on your pictures and they've already looked at your pictures. And like on the internet, I mean, on the news or something people click that – I think so, people print screen. Your pictures, as well, they might send it to somebody else and say like that...dirty stuff about you and that." These stories lead to a substantial amount of worrying when engaging with something potentially 'dangerous', and yet this all is exciting. Arthur, 11, tells me the story of how Facebook was born. He has the basics clear – "this guy was in college, and he made the thing is like the database, half of it was about girls, and it started to grow." His older counterparts, especially those with an interest in technology, or those who plan to study IT or business, paint clearer and more nuanced pictures, some of which even rationalise the commercialization of these sites. Arthur's classmate Cole tells me, albeit incorrectly, how advertising on the site is meant to distribute goodies to those who click on the ads. He says "say you click one Xbox and so you can win an Xbox 360,

when you thought you had to pay £1,000 for it, like that.” Experience tells him eventually, through our conversation, that clicking on the Xbox will generate a series of pop-ups that cannot be stopped and he eventually gets frustrated. Misconceptions around the commercial structure behind these sites also circulate, as for instance, Shayaana, 12, tells me, “Myspace is so used to the money; yeah, and the Facebook was for free.” Sophie reports stories she has heard from her parents or in the media – “because on the news there was a thing that a girl thought she was meeting someone, a 17-year-old boy when she was on Facebook chat room, but she was actually meeting an old man, and she got pulled in at school. She went to meet him and he pulled her, so that’s why my parents always check it”. Likewise, Alan, too, has listened carefully to conversations such as these and seeks out help from older relatives before he plunges into Facebook. Alan says “on Myspace and Bebo, some people write their names and they write that they’re 16 and they have a picture of a teddy bear, but really they’re a 60-year-old man who just wants to get children.” He goes on to tell me how “even Myspace does it. If you add someone, yes, and then their nickname is like poppykins or something, you don’t know them and they talk to you, and then they try to become friendly to you, and then later on, they’re trying to meet you and then do horrible stuff to you.” Clearly these stories not only share the note of worry and concern, but also that appearances can be deceptive. It is striking how almost all of these stories collected around the text are ones that call for caution, and in no way indicate possibilities and prospects – as we noted, possibilities of the kind that Cole identifies, with his eagerness to win an Xbox, are regrettably misinformed, more often than not. Yet they engage with the interface, try out new things as they gain experience with the site, for this, perhaps, is in the nature of engaged, youthful media consumption. In what Sophie says about the complicity of all these sites on data storage, one wonders if this is simply a case of being misinformed, or a cynicism in response to personal information being stored, or, and this perhaps is most worrying of all – of trust that a big, connected network of systems somewhere is preventing fraudulent behaviour.

Sophie says, “Facebook checks your MSN to see if it’s the same information that MSN has that you’re putting on your Facebook, and if it’s not, I don’t think they will let you make it. You have to give the same age, the same date of birth, the same as on your MSN.”

Early teens tell stories around the texts which are increasingly more personal, born out of individual experience or the experiences of those they know. But their stories are also increasingly positive and upbeat. Diana’s friends Ashley and Rishona, all 13, talk to me at length about how the site offers possibilities – for them to support their friend’s dad’s band to encourage a budding career just by clicking on ‘like’, to connect with a half-sister living halfway around the globe, to subvert norms which cannot be subverted in the offline world, as they report stories of how teachers were ‘got back at’ and made to cry with insults on a Facebook group, and how dangerous things do indeed happen and are scary but there seems to be an easy way out. And so, Tiffany, 13, tells me how she knows how to look after herself online, and “all these stories go around” but that she “doesn’t quite care”, or Diana, who turns to her mother to help her deal with a stalker, or Ashley who knows how to gradually disconnect someone she isn’t quite comfortable with. A contrast perhaps with Alison, also 13, who recounts personal stories (unlike her pre-teen counterparts) of problems she has herself encountered, which has left her feeling cynical and “disgusted”. John, her classmate, on listening to her stories, tells us how “things happen discreetly”. These stories all reflect similar concerns to those of those younger than them but are presented to be more manageable, in a sense, and almost always speak from personal experience, as Fritz’s thoughtful management of his worries around bullying show – as mentioned earlier, he joins a group, protects his profile, and is trying to work out how he can contribute to Safer Internet Day 2009. In general, they are less worried about negative possibilities, but are more cautious in their actions, than their older or younger counterparts. This is

perhaps because the pre-teens, when worried, lack literacies to exercise caution, and older teens, when aware of potential problems, do not seem to ‘care’.

Mid-teens share some, although not many, negative stories around the text that are also less general and more personal. High in literacies, they can ‘manage’ the interface better and seem less perturbed. Their stories are increasingly ones of engagement and connection. But they are also more confident – as for instance, is Adil – who, at 15, has, as a conscious decision, decided to remove privacy controls, because he can “see through a person” and look through his profile and photos and decide for himself who he wants to engage with. Older teens seem least bothered by any public representations of potentially dangerous things, are high in literacies and can manage interfaces efficiently. The few stories they come up with are also personal – not where they feel intruded upon by unknown others, but where they seek to break free of restrictions – 18-year-old Olisha wants to use the site to subvert her controlling mother’s opinions on her wardrobe, John has heard stories of careers being ruined and presents a personal account of how that will never happen to him. Stories become more personal, more manageable, sometimes more upbeat and usually less misinformed, as one moves across the teenage years.

Engaging textual boundaries

Evidently, not everyone approaches Facebook with the same set of expectations – whether of promise, or of control or of worries. To what extent this may be significant, is reflected in the degrees to which they participate within and with the text – their expertise with the interface that permit variant levels of problem solving and connecting, their interests in pushing against textual boundaries, their ability to work their way around barriers posed by the text all show diversity and

consensus. These indicate crucial limits, gaps and possibilities afforded by the text, but also begin to indicate a range of tasks in engaging textual boundaries.

Expertise with the interface

So why draw attention to questions that are largely technical, in an account that specifically tries to move beyond a technology-dominated account of who can do what and who cannot? It is precisely because the design of the interface presents a set of (changing, although at some level, steady) conventions and norms, failing to abide by which hinders or enhances, but shapes, at least, textual experience. Expertise with the interface is at its lowest with pre-teens. A high amount of conceptual knowledge prevails though – privacy settings can be changed, abuse can be reported, events can be organized on a large scale and massive groups can be created. An expectation seems to be that the more personalized an interface is, the more expertise it demands, and pre-teens find these interfaces more attractive. As Amber tells me, there are “massive groups” that “organise raves and parties and people RSVP and then it’s all great”, but she doesn’t quite know how to join one. Thomas does not know how to stop getting flooded by countless email notifications, for instance, and uses his mother’s account to log on to the site, depending on his mother to keep her emails free of spam. His classmate Julia says there is no way in which they can control who sees their photos, but as long as she is “looking pretty enough”, it doesn’t bother her. Examples such as these are countless – Cole cannot manage pop-ups, Arthur does not realise how he has “been signed up to groups” he didn’t wish to belong to and Abby says, “This is the way people hack you. Someone has put on my Bebo that I’m 22, which I’m not.” A global awareness – of the participatory potential of large groups, of the creative potential of interfaces such as Myspace which afford a range of options to deck up one’s profile, of the disruptive potential of targeted advertising, and of the intrusive potential of incomplete or poorly managed privacy controls – is present. The technical competencies to see this

awareness through to action (as Sophie or Alan cannot, despite their worries about making their profiles public), or the critical competencies of working out why what happens (as Thomas, for instance, like many like him, thinks Facebook groups always raise money for events), is elusive.

Expertise is high with early and mid-teens and is used to explore a range of options (groups, games, quizzes, working out newer things). Efficiency in organizing friends lists – as Rishona pithily points out, by saying how real life families are never listed as family on the sites and how friends become family and can see all, managing album privacy settings so that being tagged in a “wild girl’s album” does not mean Rishona’s older sister can see her – managing friends and family in separate categories in the site are high. Strikingly, there is a ceiling to which they want to be experts in terms of interface design. Many speak of Myspace affordances that allow for profiles to be decked up as childish, or even competitive as it removes the level playing field offered by straightforward interfaces such as Facebook (see also Livingstone, 2008a). As Delia, 16, points out, “Facebook is better than Myspace because there is more competition”, because of the many ways in which Myspace allows one to personalise the interface, at least aesthetically, which is also what makes Bahri, 15, say that interfaces that allow for more glitter and have more affordances than Facebook are “more challenging”. Asif, 13, has worked out many ways in which to be what his classmate Tiffany calls a “serial poser”, and can edit, deck up and distribute his photos with ease, create quizzes for his friends and can try and fail and try again. Early teens join countless groups for fun, as Shelly explains – joining a breast cancer support group (and Shelly, unlike Amber, is able to work out how the group leads to a marathon in the real world, in which she participates to do her bit) – is different from joining a group called ‘Miss Gamble Killed a Dinosaur’, which is simply a way of subverting a certain teacher’s authority in the classroom by mocking her behind her back. They all seem to be adept at dealing with advertisements (contrast this with Cole’s frustrations with the Xbox advert),

and Chip, 16, speaks for many of his peers when he says “ignoring adverts is easy, no pressure or anything”.

Older teens show high expertise with online interfaces and interestingly a narrower range of paths through which they use these technical skills. The experimentation with endless quizzes and games and poke wars seem to disappear, a large amount of critical literacy is visible – in contextualizing the commercial nature of the text, as evidenced by Samuel and Neal who explain to me why targeted advertising is a good idea and yet should be ignored, an awareness of how to control which settings and for whom, as Rhea or John point out, a fluency with altering settings, managing friend feeds, and generally customizing what the site has on offer to what they want to be offered.

Creativity and participation

Strikingly enough for a platform that is part of a general focus on user-generated content in the age of Web 2.0, the site seems to offer little in terms of creativity. Aesthetic creativity, by necessity, demands a high degree of technical competencies and literacy and some amount of experimentation, not all of which is necessarily afforded by the site – as Leanne points out, if she wishes to experiment with her artwork, Facebook is not the best place to do so. Creativity that is collaborative in nature – contrast the acts of joining a series of groups versus creating a group yourself – is perhaps less demanding technically but requires initiative and organization. Pre-teens perhaps experiment the least as they try to grapple with the potentials of the interface. So, while none of them show truly experimental or frequently changing profile photos, and while most cannot explain how groups or causes really work, an effort to engage, connect with others and even support causes in the world is clear. Amber, for instance, has “made friends” with the Edgware Fan Club and spends some time trying to work out how to “really do something”, which is different perhaps from

joining a group called 'I like diet coke'. Amber, Sophie, Alan and Abby all point out to me that joining seemingly trite groups – such as one started by a classmate on why waking up on a Monday morning was infuriating – shows others that you share similar interests, or that you 'agree with them'. The cynicism in some older children about supporting causes when clearly the interfaces don't make it clear how they work, is less prevalent amongst those who are only beginning their interactions with the site. Amber is hopeful about the breast cancer group she has joined, for instance. But few seem to have taken an initiative and pursued opportunities – the consensus seems to be that if others have started something one will probably join in for a range of reasons, from reaching out and showing support and solidarity, to truly believing in a cause.

Early teens push textual boundaries, participate in a high number of groups for supporting each other's artwork, friends and families, they creatively edit photos, and experiment with as much they are allowed to experiment with on the interface. They re-interpret textual spaces (family for instance) to disconnect with real family and instead show ties with close friends. Rishona, Ashley and Diana – a group of three close friends, all 13 – experiment with love-hate messages on profiles. Rishona posts a hurtful message on Diana's wall for the world to see, but Diana explains to me later how this merely shows how close they are. A parallel set of codes, dos and don'ts, seems to work with the large amounts of participation and engagement, as, for instance, was demonstrated by Josephine and Catherine, both 14, who point out how 'pokes' and 'poke wars' have their own symbolic significance – ignoring somebody's poke might mean anything from rejecting a potential romantic interest to just wishing to freeze someone out of the circle. Using MacBooks or photo editing software to touch up friends' photos, to alter expressions, add swirls, as Diana and her friends do, or to pose in a range of macho ways, as Asif does, and to list dearest friends as family, but then to be perplexed by the possibilities of being perceived by boys to be a lesbian when they are not, but listed a girlfriend as a

married partner – the triumphs and trials represented by all of this emerge from a high degree of technical literacy but also a growing involvement with the text. Sometimes participation stems from a strong personal cause, and here perhaps there is consensus between 13-year-old Fritz, whose friend has been cyber-bullied and who fixes a Safer Internet Day stamp to his profile and has clearly read up on bullying online, and 11-year-old Amber, who has recently started supporting breast cancer research having lost a friend to cancer. The difference is perhaps that Fritz, having had more time on the site, and having a higher literacy, is better equipped not only to work out and explain how it works, but also knows the possibilities and limits of what he can, after all, contribute, concretely, as one of many members worldwide.

Mid-teens take the lead in using intra-textual spaces – games, quizzes and interviews – that let them compare, contrast, rank or even buy and sell their friends. Consider Cathy and Sebastian, both 16, who seem to be so drawn into a quiz Cathy is taking on Sebastian’s behalf, poking people on Sebastian’s behalf, that the interview comes to a halt. By contrast, their younger counterpart Jeremy, 13, is dismissive of these online spaces, and chooses to engage with friends directly, as he tells me, “games, applications, quizzes – there’s no point in this and that”. In contrast to their youngest peers, early, middle and older teens do seem to seek narratives of sorts – as Cathy puts it, “and then what happened?” when someone posts an update that is intriguing, but this narrative seeking is shaped by one’s existing social circle. As Pat, 18, points out, “I don’t care what some girl from my sixth form has done as she waits for her whatever-that-thing-is”. Anne, Simon, Adil, Delia and Chip, all in their mid-teens, spend an extensive amount of time in applications on the site – gaming, quizzes, intra-textual spaces – these are interestingly enough not always demanding in terms of reaching out to others and connecting with others. Contrast this with pre or early teens who are beginning to use the site primarily to engage with peers and to get to know new people. Curiosity about these spaces

persists in the pre-teens though, as Ewan and Agit, both 11, cannot wait to work out a new game that promises molten lava at some stage of difficulty. Stories of experimentation and creativity decrease for older teens even though their abilities to play with the interface within restraints are high. Two notable exceptions of very different kinds stand out. Milly, at 18, creative enough to get tired of Facebook, comes interestingly close to 11-year-old Amber who likes glittery backgrounds on Myspace, to say that she likes wearing coloured lenses to diversify and so, Facebook seems like a “uniform” to her to which she wishes to, but cannot quite make, a “visual difference”. Munir, also 18, like his younger peers who are often distracted by Xbox adverts and happy fishing games, is unable to coherently respond to me at all during the interview, and in fact, needs to be repeatedly asked to turn the volume down as he withdraws into his own non-participatory shell, playing Crazy Taxi. That, for instance, represents an hour spent on “social networking” – alone, and disconnected.

Empirical findings

A selection of empirical findings can perhaps now be recapitulated. Young children use a range of discursive tropes to locate an unknown author somewhere behind it all. The author is powerful, distant, unknown and, as Sophia and Shakira reveal, represents someone who knows everything and can use this knowledge for a range of ends. But sometimes this is also a perceived solution to problems. This image of an unknown author persists in interviews with slightly older children, although it is less discursively apparent. The image here shows a gradual shift from one of unquestionable power and singular authority to a system of people, fallible, and predictably stealing ideas from each other. The ‘power’ of the author almost disappears for those approaching adulthood who make no reference to a strange and unknown singular figure behind the text. For

older teens, a commercial awareness of the genre, and the commercial nature of its being, become explicit and even justified.

Pre-teens place a strikingly high amount of trust in the brand – in the author they cannot see, but who they trust, exists. Often enough, they are misconceptions and are born out of inexperience in dealing with these interfaces. Early teens also begin to have divergent expectations of different articulations of the genre, so while they share a perception of some system behind all of this, they can distinguish, albeit with a range of misconceptions, how and why those behind Facebook have different expectations from them than those behind Myspace. Older teens display the highest amount of scepticism, having located these sites as companies ‘out there’, trying out new things to earn money. Pre-teens are the most cautious and are largely sceptical about other users. ‘Others’ for them are usually known or unknown children ‘out there’ who fall prey to paedophiles or a range of dangers online because they surely must have done something wrong.

Early teens seem to begin to divide other users into a range of categories – people they want to get to know, people ‘out there’ to get into trouble, and people they would perhaps wish to ‘try’ out with guarded curiosity. In contrast to their pre-teen counterparts who are hesitant in the fact of knowing there are unknown others ‘out there’ wishing to harm unsuspecting children, mid-teens begin to show some disdain for those who cannot guard their privacy online and let themselves fall prey to unwanted incidents, or those who are too childish for the site. The consensus clearly is that everyone interfaces with the site not only to engage with others, but with an awareness of those watching them. The ways in which this awareness maps out across teenage and individual experiences is different.

Pre-teens seem to throw up a wide range of stories collected from the media, parents and conversations around them. Most of these are stories that cause them concern, and yet propel them to try things out. Early teens tell stories around the texts which are increasingly more personal, born out of individual experience or the experiences of those they know. Mid-teens share some, although not many, negative stories around the text that are also less general and more personal. High in literacies, they can ‘manage’ the interface better and seem less perturbed.

Expertise with the interface is at its lowest with pre-teens. A high amount of conceptual knowledge prevails though – privacy settings can be changed, abuse can be reported, events can be organized on a large scale and massive groups can be created. Expertise is high with early and mid-teens and is used to explore a range of options (groups, games, quizzes, working out new things). Older teens show high expertise with online interfaces and interestingly a narrower range of paths through which they use these technical skills. Pre-teens perhaps experiment the least as they try to grapple with the potentials of the interface. Early teens push textual boundaries, participate in a high number of groups for supporting each other’s artwork, friends and families, they creatively edit photos, and experiment with as much they are allowed to experiment with on Facebook. Mid-teens take the lead in using intra-textual spaces – games, quizzes and interviews – that let them compare, contrast, rank or even buy and sell their friends.

Conclusion

When audience researchers highlighted heterogeneity, diversity and difference in interpretative work, it was a politically significant moment not just for empirical audience reception studies but for media and communications studies, for at least two reasons. First, as far as it established divergence

between what has been intended in the encoding of a text (authorial purposes) and what has been interpreted (readers' meaning making), the significance was that it countered the singular authority of the text, and perhaps indeed that of the textual analyst. Second, in also thinking through divergence between those who interpret, it not only countered the image of the mass audience being passive, homogeneous recipients of messages, but also outlined how the real, lived practices of meaning making are shaped by contextual specificities. The counter argument was that it took all of this too far, misread issues of power and kept encountering the 'so what' question. As we have seen in this chapter, especially in the backdrop provided by the previous chapter, engagement with interactive interfaces (and doubtless in this thesis I focus more on syntax and shape rather than on content), is resourced and shaped by experiences specific to steps in growing up and engaging with the world, it is shaped by individual life stories and the intersection of a range of social axes. Is all divergence significant? Consider the themes highlighted for faith in the brand and perceptions of (a largely unknown) author. The dissimilarities in the perceptions of authorial power indicate a changing level of confidence in these children, so the greater the perceived power of those who design the interface, the greater perhaps the uncertainty in experimenting and the trust, consequently, in the producers. Pushing boundaries, reworking textual spaces to make for alternative meaning making, not necessarily intended by the producers (consider the case of listing friends as family) indicate the taking up of opportunities that were not anticipated in the construction of the text as such. The weaving of narratives around the text, sharing stories and perceptions of the text, resourced by a varying mix of personal accounts, third person stories and stories collected from conversations out there in the world, all indicate the continuous task of contextualizing and accounting for the way the media works in our lives, and the nature and sources of these stories indicate, amongst other things, the trust placed in the text and the expectations built around it.

Consider how, in the light of what has been discussed, relationships are differentially mediated by these children, as they engage with the text from a diversity of perspectives. Pre-teens speak of many instances of sharing their online experiences with close adults. Many, like Alan, share passwords with parents, confide in parents or older relatives about fears, for instance, like Sophia. Some, like Julia, make the time to teach those in a previous generation how to use the interface, or even stay connected to family far away. Far from the argument of the media isolating children from their families, it seems the shared concerns around textual complexities bring them closer. Interestingly, these bonds do not seem to be around textual possibilities. Some show a stark contrast – family is increasingly kept at bay, often not added on friends’ lists and usually not listed as family on profiles. On the other hand, friends are listed as family – with best friends showing marital relationships, and parent–child relationships online. Life experiences influence many choices made on the interface for all teens – consider Amber’s cancer support or Fritz’s support of Safer Internet Day. Many mid-teens reconnect with family online, but are working out suitable ways in which to manage these relationships. For both early and mid-teens, ways of connecting that are largely non-verbal – for instance ‘poking’ someone – become significant and symbolic. The return of pokes, engaging in poke wars and ignoring pokes determine and reflect the closeness in relationships. Older teens with higher literacies with the interface no longer share frantic worries over who might see what within friends’ lists, partially because managing these relationships on the interface has become an area of expertise. And indeed there are exceptions, which have other gendered, classed explanations, or are sometimes, just puzzling.

Findings for other sites, and indeed other genres, will doubtless be different, as would an analysis by gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status have thrown up differently interesting results. But it is significant nonetheless to note that engagement with an interface where much is user generated and

where active participation (writing on others' walls, putting up self-portraits, playing games) determines much of what is got out of the text, is shaped by resources offered by a range of contextual factors that account for (significant) divergence. This points out two things, both of which are interesting and shall be taken up in the following chapter. First, textual experiences, however shaped by the contextual location of interpreters, are simultaneously shaped (afforded, even) by the design of the text itself. Consequently, the act of interpretation demands the fulfilment of a range of responsibilities – expecting, anticipating, agreeing, disagreeing, violating, accommodating, rejecting, accepting, experimenting – all work within and against textual spaces and affordances and the task of interpretation is demanding and clear. This is what the following chapter, *The task of interpretation*, pursues.

7. The task of interpretation

Until now, I have suggested that this thesis seeks to understand the ways in which concepts that lay at the heart of audience reception studies illuminate our understanding of the ways in which people use new media – hence a ‘text-reader’ analysis of children’s engagement with an online genre. Chapter 5 drew attention to the contextual shaping of interpretation, Chapter 6 showed how interpretation diverges, meaningfully. In presenting a text-reader analysis of youthful engagement with an online genre, this chapter explores four broad (but not exhaustive) categories of tasks involved in interpretative work. In this chapter I use empirical material illustratively to bring out a range of responsibilities involved in what I frame as interpretative work. One of the contrasts with the preceding chapter, in this context, is the way in which I present my empirical material as verbal snapshots from the interview transcripts, showing glimpses of the ‘conversation’ that interviews could become. In the previous chapter, I extracted children’s words out of such a context when I sought for evidence of diversity in interpretive work, and in this chapter, I present glimpses of the conversation as it happened between me and the interviewed child. This says something about the nature of the interviews, about the ease with which children can talk about social networking, and about the task of the researcher here in guiding them and drawing them out. The interview excerpts position me, as a researcher, as well as them, as will clearly be evident.

The combined intellectual task of Chapters 6 and 7 is two-fold. Asking if the conceptual repertoire of audience reception theory, presented in Chapter 3, is relevant in the age of the internet presents us with two ambitions. The first is to pinpoint the ways in which our theoretical tools derived from mass-mediated communication need to be revised, retained and revisited in the context of

interactive, multimodal communication. But this task of ‘fitting’ tools to moments of mediation is perhaps not enough, for the next question follows thus. If the repertoire continues to make sense, hence indicating that interpretation (*audiencing?*) continues through use, what contribution, empirically and theoretically, can this exercise make towards understanding how new genres are interpreted? Refining and employing the text-reader metaphor is a task that helps the audience researcher face the challenge of changing audiences (Livingstone, 2004), but unless this exercise provides ways forward of some significance to questions in the age of the internet, perhaps the audience researcher cannot quite enter the age of the internet (Livingstone, 2004) with significant contributions in their own right. One of the outcomes of such an inquiry, I suggest, is to move towards a conceptual investigation of concepts in the repertoire of audience researchers, in the face of a very different kind of text than what these concepts have hitherto been used for. In the following chapter, I demonstrate such a conceptual investigation and analysis with selected concepts. Another outcome is to understand how such an approach contributes to, diverges from and fits in with what is known as internet research, by non-audience researchers. This is a direction I take up in the concluding chapter.

This chapter is organized in two major sections, the first of which outlines a range of tasks involved in interpretation, with the second discussing the tasks themselves, with illustrative examples. These tasks follow from a deductive stance (discussed at length in Chapter 4), and the attempt with these is not to outline a taxonomy or a to-do list of any sort, but rather to draw attention to a selection of the range of tasks these children perform (or not) in social networking. Note Iser, writing for the interpretation of printed (literary) texts:

We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. (Iser et al, 1980, p. 289)

Chapter 2 brought together a discussion of interpretation in the context of mass media and a discussion of media literacy as one of the ways in which audience reception research has touched research with the internet. I note that all of this, at least in their focus on analytical, evaluative and critical tasks, parallel what Iser says above. There is, here, a recognition of the complexity and range of tasks involved in interpretation, true of literacies, as we shall see, and identifying these emerges to be central to moving on from my account of interpretative divergence. In what ways is this exercise – of identifying strands of tasks at all – a useful one? Are all these dimensions necessary? What has been ignored and what highlighted?

Interpretative work: the task of interpretation

This thesis, in connecting audiences and users, has referred to both interpretation and literacies as work, following Liebes and Katz's (1993) conceptualization of the task of interpretation in audiences interpreting *Dallas*. *Interpretative work*, by definition then, includes a doing noun – work – inscribed into it. As Katz asked, do viewers work? (Katz, 1996; quoting from Schramm et al, 1961). He noted their claim that the text neither dictates the reader nor is it an inkblot, as discussed earlier. And thus the field got the idea of viewers' work – 'what interests us, is not what people take from television, but what they put into it' (Katz, 1996, p. 11). *Audiencing*, following Fiske (1992) and the act of using Web 2.0, both require people to put something into the media. There is a range of tasks to do, responsibilities to fulfil in relation to the text and in relation to the expectations that one holds of the text. This is by no means a finite list of tasks, but that does not make it entirely irrelevant to work what the nature of some of these tasks is.

Definitions of media literacies, on the other hand, make such work very clear – in analysing, evaluating, critiquing and creating the media, there are tasks to be performed. Hence, perhaps, Iser's (1974) reminder of looking forward, backward, deciding, changing decisions, forming expectations, questioning and musing, fit appropriately into the category of interpretative work. In interpreting, there are tasks of commuting involved – from the text to the social world, especially when the social world is inscribed continuously into a continually changing text, hence perhaps Liebes and Katz's notion of referential readings (1993). But there is also a task of commuting between modes, genres and even media, as interactive spaces are increasingly multigeneric and multimodal, reminding us of concepts such as intertextuality, which lie at the heart of textual analysis. The concept of the interpretative contract, as outlined in Chapter 3, reminds us of how the contractual relationship of mutuality between the interpreter and that which is interpreted (Livingstone, 2008) can be breached (by a resistant reader) or accepted (by a reader whose meanings align themselves with inscribed ideologies in the text). There is always therefore, a range of potential interpretations, although they are finite.

The interpretative logic of the four tasks through deduction and induction

In what follows, children's interpretative work is presented in a set of four tasks, which are by necessity, overlapping. These lie midway between deductive and inductive logics of analysis and interpretation. The overall categories – lateral referencing in interpretation, interruptions in interpretation, critique in interpretation and play, pleasure and connection in interpretation – are largely deductive categories, emergent from the theoretical repertoire mobilized for this thesis. They animate concepts such as encountering textual spaces of restraint, that is, interruptions, or the role

of critique and resistance in encountering texts, and the role of lateral references in contextualizing a genre in a range of diverse others and within the social world. The fourth category – play, pleasure and connection in interpretation – was always embedded in the history of audience reception studies as audiences interpreted, and spoke about the media together, and today is made necessary by the fact that the Web 2.0 text being interpreted by these youthful voices is both co-authored by many (within limits) and in being co-authored, is co-realized. Each set of deductively selected tasks is used to bring together a largely inductive set of sub-tasks, emergent from conversations with children as they went online. So, for instance, the primarily deductive category – critique in interpretation – includes acts of ignoring persuasion, resisting manipulation, ignoring inconsistencies, being semantically and syntactically critical and often, not doing any of these tasks. Instances of both ends abound. Here, the overall task of critique (semantic and well as syntactic) (Liebes and Katz, 1993), and of resistance is a primarily deductive category emergent from the empirical insights of audience reception studies, which, for instance, have highlighted the role of resistance in interpretation, but also from definitions of media literacy, which have the task of critique, analysis and evaluation inscribed in its ambitions. Other dimensions, for instance, being circumspect or daring in engaging with the text, or in being collaborative or individualistic, are largely inductive aspects, emergent from the empirical data.

By using the word ‘dimension’ or ‘task’ in place of ‘category’ or ‘mode’ I indicate that these are not part of a typology of any sort, are barely indicative of a range of tasks to be performed in interpretation and hence, far from exhaustive, but more importantly, these aspects overlap, their boundaries intersect and touch each other. So, is the task of resistance entirely different from the task of being aware of the norms and conventions of a genre? Is lateral reading in interpretation entirely unrelated to the task of being collaborative? Surely not. This chapter makes it its task to take

apart a section of a range of many different acts one performs in interpretation. A brief description of these dimensions are summarized in Table 7.1 below, where, for every dimension, I pay attention to the role of the text and that of the reader.

Table 7.1. The task of interpretation

Task	Range of interpretative work involved	Note
Lateral referencing in interpretation	Being informed of a genre in the context of others Developing expertise in identifying generic conventions Speculating Comparing	Lateral connections exist with what went before. The text exists in a specific aesthetic, economic, social and cultural location. It provides a range of possible interpretations with a range of possible consequences.
Tackling interruptions in interpretation	Resolving problems Ignoring persuasion Being circumspect Daring Stumbling	The text provides spaces for (potential) problems. Sometimes, there are opportunities for resolutions embedded in the text, in varied degrees of accessibility.
Critique in interpretation	Resisting persuasion Critiquing manipulation Being sceptical Trusting Accepting	Spaces within the text are designed to persuade, misrepresent, manipulate or deceive. These spaces may either resource or restrain those who interact with the text. Spaces within the text promise potential possibilities. These may sometimes be deceptive.
Play, pleasure and connection in interpretation	Engaging Participating Linking the text and the world Disconnecting	The nature of the text makes available opportunities for engaging with others, as well as spaces for representing oneself or pursuing goals which do not require collaboration.

Lateral referencing in interpretation

Lateral referencing seems strikingly close to the concept of intertextuality, although in itself, I use the term 'lateral referencing' to refer to a far more restricted account than what the theory of

intertextuality proposes. Intertextuality, as a concept, entered the parlance of communication and cultural studies through Kristeva's work (1984). The theory of intertextuality includes broadly two dimensions – the intertextuality inscribed in the production of texts because the author has read texts before writing it and the text does not exist in isolation, and the lateral connections made across texts in the act of reading. Following Gunther Kress, in Chapter 3 I outlined how texts are born in a reading, or lateral interpretations, where one genre is almost always compared with, connected with or tied into others, and where spaces within a genre are interpreted as interlinked and often woven into a narrative of connection. Generic similarities and dissimilarities are discovered, with varied amounts of information and speculation, reminding us often of what Livingstone had called the knowledgeable reader (Livingstone, 1998a). Meinhof and Smith, in introducing their edited collection on intertextuality and the media, remind us of the superficiality of the claim that all texts bear semblances of other texts, and that there is an interaction between texts, authors, readers and their lifeworlds (2000). In a sense the discussion presented here is more restricted than the horizon opened up by Meinhof and Smith above, because it draws attention to users' references in reading – these references calling on various types of knowledge of other genres and other forms. It is that specific aspect that I wish to highlight in what follows, rather than pursuing the more global account of intertextuality in interpretation.

Hybridity in the birth of a genre seems clear in the lateral ways in which they are read. Two 16-year-old boys, attending private schooling outside of London, and invested in developing software, hardware and generally, a future in technology, tell me how Facebook has been designed as an excellent advertising tool. The link one of them intriguingly draws on is not with another member of the same genre but rather with a video-sharing site, reminding us of Kress's (2003) point on hybrid genres being born from pre-existing or contemporary others. Neal tells me, "So many people use

Facebook these days, it is an excellent advertising tool. It happens on YouTube as well, you will get adverts for certain things, most of the time you'll just completely ignore them, but there will be one or two which look pretty interesting.”

Samuel looks at the genre as a whole, covering Myspace, Facebook, Orkut and many others, and provides his critical take on public scripts around advertising on SNSs. Note how he works out a different ‘strategy’ of reconciling the commercial nature of these services, drawing attention not only to the conventionalized nature of interactions (Kress, 2003), but also the continuously established conventions that make these kinds of strategies necessary, and interactions possible. Samuel reasons “What people can’t appreciate is that when you think about it, if you were going to set up a server and code the Facebook, it would take years and it would cost millions, and people don’t think...they think, how dare they advertise to us, but how come they’re not charging for it, but would you rather be paying £2, 3, 6 a month and not be advertised to or rather just have someone advertise to you and be able to completely ignore it. Basically it is a subscription service, or should be so.”

Interestingly, reading laterally, and being at the highest possible end of being informed and knowledgeable is not simply a question of meta comparisons between generic similarities across diverse Web 2.0 forms. Fifteen-year-old Martin has learned how to distinguish similarities and differences between micro-spaces within the genre where internal and external commercial presences can be discerned. He has followed a line of adverts, despite clearly ignoring them, to begin to develop a typology of sorts between which ones will keep him within the textual boundaries of Facebook and which ones will push him further away. Like Iser’s sentences, where the one prepares the context for the next, every individual advert then perhaps contains ‘a preview of the next’ and forms ‘a kind of viewfinder for what is to come’ (1974, p. 279). Martin points out subtle differences

between the various kinds of commercial advertisements on Facebook. When asked what the difference is, he reveals an implicit trust in the brand of Facebook, something I drew attention to in the previous chapter. He says “a Facebook ad would be advertising a utility that you haven’t...maybe you don’t use or they’re suggesting is useful for you, obviously another ad would be just advertising materials and things like that from shops and stuff.”

In a similar comparison of generic forms with another generic form, 12-year-olds Ewen and Agit, focused and dedicated gamers on Facebook, largely disconnected from anything else on the site except the games, compare the textual affordances of games by comparing graphics between multiple versions of what at first appears to them to be an entirely different game, but which they ultimately grasp to be similar. While one challenges you to grow a farm where crops die unless you tend to them, another challenges the player to keep virtual fish as pets that die unless you go back and feed them regularly. Ewen’s profile below kept receiving pop-up reminders for him to feed his fish.

Interviewer: “Oh, look! So two Fishvilles have come up right here....”

Ewen: “I’ve done it 10 times.”

Agit: “I’ve done it twice.”

Interviewer: “So, do you think it’s the same as Farmville or Yoville?”

Agit: “Yoville is completely different.”

Interviewer: “How is it different?”

Ewen: “So is Farmville.”

Agit: “None of the games are like exactly each other, but some of the pet games are like that, Pet Society, like Petville.”

Interviewer: “How are they similar?”

Ewen: “They are like the same because exactly the same thing, you do the same thing, but like it’s got different kind of graphics.”

‘Generic intertextuality can have a subversive or radical function within a text, because it can alert the critical viewer to similarities between genres which apparently have very different interests and aims’ (Cranny-Francis, 1988, p. 174). These trans-genre similarities and differences contribute to

what Jauss calls the *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations) where the norms of the genre, and contemporary familiar literary-historical surroundings play a role in intertextual appreciation of a text. MSN for instance, belongs elsewhere, and not quite in the same category as Facebook, but John, an older teen, compares them thus in a similar ‘surrounding’ by means of comparing evolutionary stages: “I think Facebook almost grew out of the internet, didn’t they, and [this] take[s] them to almost something like a more MSN-ish point”. Similarly, Mark compares Facebook with Amazon, somewhat surprisingly. He feels wise, although his comparisons are not necessarily plausible – “Amazon is sort of the best one because it’s, you know, when it was originally created it was set up to be live chat and everything. Whereas Facebook chat, you know, is sort of in its infant stage. It would be good if you could kind of use it a few more, like those smileys and everything, just, you know, joke around and everything, but I know it’s basic for what it is. But, you know, the whole point about Facebook isn’t to chat live.”

Like Mark, Leanne, an older teen, rationalizes the differences between Facebook Chat and Myspace by outlining how the chat is not the primary function of Facebook, whereas for MSN it is. She says, “Facebook, as I said, I think it’s like just for looking at people’s photos and just checking out their life and stuff, but I mean like they’re good at that as well. But this is just like, you know, just to make people go on it a bit more, and it’s just put the chat thing in as well. But MSN is like designed to have chat, so they’re like more...how do I say it? They’re focused more on the functions more just for chatting, if you know what I mean, so I just think it’s better, and they design it more [unclear] is just right, it’s not just put on the side.” And yet, for 12-year-old Cole, it is specifically because Facebook isn’t live that it isn’t ‘real’. He struggles to explain to me how MSN is different from Skype which is different from Facebook chat – thereby extracting one component of Facebook (the chat)

into a comparison with other pre-existing and stand-alone chatting platforms, and in the end, settles for “Skype is like MSN, but you can actually say words and you can speak”.

A slightly different kind of lateral referencing in reading is evidenced by 11-year-old Arthur who has worked out that there is a task in developing one’s own narrative of expertise. Applications (like the game or the chat, another micro-space within the broader genre) must be mastered in some sequence where expertise evolves over time. One link is similar to another, but there are ones more complicated than the last. Each then provides an insight into the next, something grasped through learning by doing, as Arthur explains that “you start off with like the basic apps, like links and those, videos and groups and then you can just, when you go onto something, you can add it down there, and then you go on to newer ones and then you just know the next ones and you just know.” Later Arthur connects newspaper spaces with Twitter celebrities and their Facebook profiles, using one to trace another and using that to work out the genuineness of Facebook profiles. He stumbles in demonstrating it to me, as we discuss what he decides is a genuine Beyoncé profile, because it has “proper pictures”. But he explains the newspaper–Twitter–Facebook link adeptly, and is on his way to sifting out the genuine from the fake, although the task of critiquing what he decides to be genuine is another question altogether. He points out that some of Twitter’s celebrities are on Facebook, and when asked how he knows that these are not false profiles, he speaks of a strategy, “a picture of a celebrity, a proper picture, where something will be official, like that, and you know it’s there [...] like in the London paper, they have like Twitter days. It gives you Twitter names, so like if you search a name it will come up. If you search a name it will come up with ten options, but the one with the most followers is bound to be her, and the one which sounds like her is bound to be her.”

Public scripts around expectations and concerns about these online spaces get intertwined with generic speculations stemming from mis/information in the conversation below, between Shayaana and Abby, two 13-year-old girls at an inner London state school where safety concerns on and offline seem to echo across the children. Shayaana and Abby place Facebook and Myspace in the same comparative frame and then seem to diverge in the anticipations they have of these two in terms of safety. The consensus they reach is a confident, albeit misinformed one perhaps, where they think Facebook is about to end by Easter 2010. This consensus is ambiguous, and obviously misinformed because now they think Facebook is pay for access. The comparisons, however, are intriguing.

Shayaana: “Myspace is kind of like Facebook but the only thing that’s different is like random people add you. Like older people add you and...”

Abby: “And Myspace I think is more safe than Facebook because on Facebook you can just...people can just add you and you don’t even notice.”

Interviewer: “No, but she’s saying that Facebook is safer than Myspace, right?”

Shayaana: “Yeah, I think that Facebook is safer.”

Abby: “I don’t at all because if you think...if you read about in the newspapers everyone is getting is...”

Shayaana: “Facebook, never Myspace. There used to be...”

Abby: “I told you like when Myspace got paid and Facebook was for free everyone stopped...what? Why is it like this?”

Shayaana: “And everyone stopped Myspace and went to Facebook because like it was for free. And now because in February it’s going to come and they said February/March, and they said that Facebook is going to finish and they’re all going to rush to Myspace or Bebo or something.”

And thus, comparisons and an analysis of not only similarities and differences, but also the potential reasons – evolutionary, commercial, social – behind these similarities and differences between genres and within genres are analysed in interpretation. Staying for a moment with Shayaana and Abby’s stories about fears of negative spaces on Facebook, I now move on to ‘tackling interruptions in interpretation’, where my focus lies especially on the interruptions brought about by negative experiences or spaces contained within the text.

Tackling interruptions in interpretation

Whenever the flow is interrupted (in the text) and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (Iser et al, 1980, p. 280)

The stories in this section are not happy ones, because they represent a narrative of suspicion, fear and being wary when exploring what Kelly, 16, has aptly termed ‘Facebook streets’. The interruptions I highlight here are potentially dangerous. There are many potential interruptions to interpretation and following Iser (1974), boredom and overstrain are key ones I followed. Interestingly, contrary to expectations of boredom with repetitive games and spam or overstrain with difficulties in blocking annoying adverts, the most striking (and for me, unanticipated) interruptions in being on Facebook came up in the form of fear of the unknown, punctuated with media images and everyday talk about ‘paedos’ and old men, occasionally by personal experiences with good looking men and most importantly, a range of strategies to keep things steady. I note here, that these stories, like all empirical data, are open to analysis and interpretation from a diversity of angles – in this case children’s perceptions of online risks being a conversation where the stories below fit aptly. A text-reader analysis will, I hope, allow me to focus on the link between what is anticipated of the text, what expertise is developed as a consequence and the diversity in strategies these make evident.

Earlier, we met Kelly, 16, who, on being stalked by a parent, has with time, developed a calm and collected strategy of making herself almost invisible on Facebook. Rishona, nearly 14, however, enjoys the fun of sifting out “nice” people on Facebook from the ones who are not so nice by guessing if their photos are Google images or genuine ones. She does not seek help in this task. The

contract demands that ambiguous spaces (in this case, unknown strangers posing to be friends) are interpreted reflexively, leading to walks down one of three pathways in interfacing with the text. The first is to get into trouble and stumble, the second is to work out a strategy of avoiding these spaces and the third perhaps is a mix – to experiment, take risks and to work out what happens next. Rishona does this last, while 11-year-old Ryan chooses the second.

Rishona: “If I don’t think that he’s nice, or whatever, so I’ll first meet him online, when I first meet him I’ll go do searches when he first added me, I’ll make sure that like they are not like obviously from like Google or something.”

Interviewer: “What would people get from Google?”

Rishona: “Oh, well, some of my friends used to be funny, well, they used to make fake accounts, so like they only add people they know. So they’ll make fake accounts and then find photos of models on Google and be like, I’m a really good looking guy. So they add...so like it looks like they have loads of like really good looking guys. So you can tell if they’re fake or not.”

The much more cautious Ryan and Belinda, both 11, who clearly do not enjoy this game, tell me stories they have heard when adults discuss the news. Both know they must be careful on Facebook and Ryan unsurely, but convincingly, reports a rape and murder story he has heard, thus – “they were arranging to meet and there’s this girl that, um...she went missing that day when she met them...and she like bad things they did to her and she died or something”. He is scared of ‘Facebook streets’ and puts multiple precautions in place in anticipation of similar incidents. His friend had her number passed on by her best friend to someone on MSN, from where a Facebook concern became an MSN-Facebook-Mobile phone concern and then an offline concern. He notes that he, unlike his friends, will “just watch who I add and if I don’t know someone, I won’t just go up to them and say, swear at them. I mean, I won’t go click onto them and just say, why the effing heck are you adding me or something.”

Ryan: “I’ve got my dad and my uncles on Facebook.”

Belinda: “And I’ve got like cousins and all that on Facebook, so they know what I’m chatting about.”

Ryan: “There’s this thing, yeah, where it says information and my sisters, no, my cousin, yeah, um, she put her number or something. There’s this thing under friends where you can put your phone number up and.... No, she didn’t put her phone number but there’s other people that does and, um, she was on MSN. Her friend, yeah, she gave her a number and then her friend gave her numbers to some other boy because she.... So, some boy took her friend’s phone and started putting all numbers into his phone, yeah, and he phoned my cousin at my uncle’s birthday party. My uncle’s like huge, strong and that and then, um, yeah, and then he rung and he started being all rude and that. And it was over Facebook as well and that.”

Shayaana, 13, shows me how she is being pursued by a stranger online, and how her account is being hacked, in her opinion. The conversation comes up as an interruption, literally in a conversation on joining Facebook groups for protecting the rain forest. Unlike Ryan, Rishona or Kelly, she is confused and does not quite know what she might do. Her friend Abby ‘figures out’ the age of the person trying to befriend her and refers to media stories for supporting her guess.

Shayaana: “See look, right here. I don’t know this man and he’s trying to accept me as his friend – I don’t know him.”

Interviewer: “Okay....”

Abby: “I know he’s older than you, they will have to be. Because on Facebook like you can see it on the news, sometimes they’re telling really bad stuff about it.”

Shayaana: “You don’t know him and I don’t know him.”

Abby: “Hmm....”

Shayaana: “This is the way people hack you. Someone has put on my Bebo that I’m 22, which I’m not.”

Interviewer: “You didn’t do that?”

Shayaana: “No.”

Shaheen and Bahri, 15, have just co-experienced with their entire Year group an interesting incident of someone pretending to be a gay paedophile, although they remained unclear on how they were so sure it was a question of pretence alone. Bahri too, like Rishona, enjoyed the game to an extent until it became scary, which is when his Year group reported the person. What is striking perhaps is that, for many of these stories there is an added value of excitement in pursuing these spaces of potential danger with self-selected strategies of safeguarding oneself. The text presents boundaries which may have one of two effects. As Iser puts it (1974), the ‘text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will

leave the field of play' (p. 275). These teens do not quite leave the field of play even when things go too far, but they do stop and mobilize resources to continue in it.

Bahri: "We had an experience during the summer: some guy called Jeremy Parrot was adding all of our friends from school and saying, oh, come to my and he was acting like how he was gay and like trying to act like a paedophile."

Interviewer: "He wasn't actually a paedophile?"

Bahri: "No, he wasn't actually. He was an old student. He was putting pictures and stuff and it was like trying to...and, oh, we'll do this together, we'll do that. And we reported him and he got banned. He added like all of us."

Interviewer: "But how did you figure out that this one was actually a fake person?"

Bahri: "When I started talking to him."

Interviewer: "And then what did he start saying?"

Bahri: "Gay sex."

Reception theory reminds us that 'a text may conceivably contradict our preconceptions to such a degree that it calls forth drastic reactions such as throwing a book away' (Iser et al, 1980, p8). Consider the experiences of Alison, a very quiet 14-year-old girl from a Jamaican family, violent with her classmates, clearly upset with something that she has encountered on Facebook. She decides to 'switch off'.

Alison: "What do you think of young people going on Facebook all the time. You are researching it, tell me...."

Interviewer: "I think, it's uhmm interesting, you tell me...."

Alison: "It's disgusting."

Interviewer: "What?"

Alison: "The disgusting people, sick people on there. I don't write a word. I don't let anyone tag me. It's so disgusting, just disgusting."

Critique in interpretation

Following literacy scholars, if critical awareness means evaluations and assessment in place of faith and assumptions, are these uncritical children? In the previous section we saw how all these children identified a 'problem' online, all had their own strategies to be critical in their evaluations and practices and all had failed in their attempts to resolve these problems. Sophia, who we meet later,

places all her trust in the name of Facebook; Alison decides to switch off from the text; Rishona decides on a strategy of filtering photos styles and experimenting with what she finds an interesting guessing game.

What might it mean to be critical and even resistant? Following Iser above, perhaps, resistance means the exercise of choice to say no, to turn away, to reject, refuse or simply ignore. Ideologically problematic meanings might then, as one has seen in the history of audience reception research, be rejected. But this is not always the case. Media literacy demands critique at the core of people's responsibilities – evaluating, analysing and critiquing the media. In what follows I highlight stories that speak of resisting persuasion, or accepting it, or of being syntactically and semantically critical at times, and not at other times. These are also stories that speak of scepticism and trust, sometimes, of faith in the brand or on others. Chapter 5 indicated the many invitations in Facebook – to ask questions of others' social lives, take quizzes, click on adverts that are tailored for one's specific stage in the life course, keep virtual pets which die without clicks that mean petting. Some turn away, some play on, some get immersed.

Sixteen-year-olds Cathy and Sebastian play an interesting game below – Sebastian is invited to participate in a quiz 'by Facebook' and wishes to ignore it. Cathy decides to play on for him in endless rounds of questions that lead to more questions. In the course of being drawn into the quiz, countless adverts and pop-ups are actually ignored.

Cathy: "Yeah, look, Sebastian, take the quiz. And then it'll show you [interviewer] what it's saying about him now."

Interviewer: "Oh, you are actually taking the quiz for him?"

Cathy: "Yeah, like how many kids will you have? Two."

Interviewer: "What's that mobster thing up there?"

Cathy: "I don't know; that's a pop-up. They're just...they're nothing to us. Okay, how much do you like to sleep?"

Sebastian: “A lot.”

Cathy: “So I love it.”

Sebastian: “Hurry this quiz up, pretty patient, uh, not very patient.”

Indeed, there are difficulties in reading off this instance – Cathy could ignore the quiz at some other time, Sebastian might allow only a selected few to play on his behalf. But the pop-up moment shows an immersion that ignores everything else. Has the text succeeded in this instance, in drawing the reader in and keeping them drawn in? There was a range of potential paths in which Cathy might have walked, or more generally, in which one might walk in the face of persuasive textual invitations. Earlier, one of the differences explored in this thesis between the work and the text was that the text offers a range of perspectives and patterns. These are set in motion in the act of reading. Note, then, that these patterns do indeed exist, and presumably shape what is set in motion. Interpretative choice is finite, although a range of potential choices do exist.

Consider Anne now, who at 16, has switched off, after boredom, from a particular textual space she herself says she was “addicted to”. She accepted an invitation to own a pet as part of a Facebook game, realized the strain of needing to return to the page (presumably dotted with countless adverts which benefit from multiple page visits by multiple people), and somewhere along the line, on repeating the schedule daily, Anne realized that her pet might die if she did not keep returning to ‘feed’ it, or take it for a ‘walk’. But note how, even in letting go and saying no to what are doubtless persuasive attempts, Anne reasons, saying her pet might not really have died, that it might have been put up for adoption or:

Anne: “Yeah, I just killed mine.”

Interviewer: “You killed yours?”

Anne: “Yeah, or I just, um, put it up for adoption or something. I don’t think they die, they just get sick and then they take....”

Interviewer: “So what pet did you have?”

Anne: “I had a panda.”

Interviewer: “And then?”

Anne: “And then I let it go because it was irritating me, so....”

Interviewer: “How was it irritating you?”

Anne: “It was just popping up and it’s like, I loved it [with a click], and it would go away.”

Eleven-year-old Ryan comes with his own word, Facebookaholic, which is a ‘bad’ thing to be. He looks around at other users and critiques what we might call addiction, and yet he admits he cannot stop it himself.

Ryan: “Facebookaholic is like say.... It’s like say someone’s got a drinking problem, an alcoholic, and they can’t just, and they can’t get off their drink and that, yeah, it’s just like that. You can’t get off. You’re just stuck to Facebook. You can’t [unclear]. You’re just determined to stay on it.”

Interviewer: “And is that good or bad?”

Ryan: “It’s bad.”

Interviewer: “So, then why don’t you stop it?”

Ryan: “Because we can’t.”

Arthur is syntactically critical, not just of Farmville but of many of Facebook’s games. But despite what is often a sophisticated critique – of graphics, strategies, repetitive coincidences with other games, as he provides below – he himself is what he calls ‘hooked on’ to it, because he says you have to “play it again and again and again”. And that is because, as Cole, also 11, points out, your crops die, you lose money and you lose the game.

Arthur: “It’s a farm game. It’s bad.”

Interviewer: “Why is it bad?”

Arthur: “It’s boring.”

Interviewer: “Why do people play it if you think it is boring?”

Arthur: “I don’t know. You have to play it again and again and again.”

Interviewer: “Why?”

Cole: “Because then otherwise your crops die.”

Interviewer: “Oh your crops die?”

Arthur: “You lose money.”

Interviewer: “And, then what happens? It’s not real money?”

Arthur: “No.”

Cole: “You can’t buy stuff.”

Interviewer: “Yes, and then what happens?”

Cole: “Then, you lose the game.”

Arthur: “And, then people can’t help you with the farm.”

Interviewer: “By doing what?”

Arthur: “By planting stuff for you.”

Ignoring ‘invitations’ from friends who are invited to send invitations, failing which they cannot add an application, is a real task on Facebook. Some profiles show more than a hundred similar ‘invites’ – literally perhaps invites from the text to explore spaces you could choose not to explore. Alice, 11, checks them out before rejecting most of them. She says, “I delete all the ones which are asking to be your friend on Farmville or something. I don’t really care, so I just leave it, and there’s some that say like, um, or someone wants you to join this pet society thing. I might join it, but not really.”

Eleven-year-old Sophia comes from a working-class family where her parents are proud of their child’s expertise online, make her aware of ‘bad things’ that might happen on commercial sites, but do not know the interface themselves. She understands the flaws in the space that Facebook represents, but places perhaps a worrying amount of trust in an unknown ‘author’, a ‘they’, who will resolve problems for her.

Sophia: “There are lots of pervs online. An old man pretended to be a 16-year-old girl and then met a girl who met him on Facebook, took her to a field and killed her. But I first add the people and then get to know them and then delete them if they are not fine.”

Interviewer: “But why do you add someone you don’t know? They’ll get to know stuff from your profile by then, right?”

Sophia: “No you can’t write bad things on Facebook, for they have a big computer. They will cancel your account if you are rude or a perv and never let you go online again.”

Sophia’s faith in an unknown, but nonetheless trustworthy, author behind Facebook, is echoed in Cole’s views on friends’ suggestions on Facebook. The task of evaluating who these suggestions are from, what data is used for the suggestions to be made, is left unfinished as he explains how friends are suggested by a high-tech someone out there:

Interviewer: “Who is suggesting these?”

Cole: “They’ll like generate your friends you have now, and if they generate, they give you random friends. If you know them, you accept them. If you don’t know them, then...”

Interviewer: “But, who is suggesting it?”

Cole: “Facebook.”

Interviewer: “How do they know what to suggest?”

Cole: “It’s because you see everybody’s profile. So, they can like say um...”

Interviewer: “So, you think, let’s say the stuff that you might send a message to a friend or something, that somebody else is going to see it?”

Cole: “I’m not sure about that, but it’s all computer, so it’s all high tech and all that.”

In discussing the interpretative contract in Chapter 3, I had noted that consistency is crucial for engagement with the text to continue. If sense cannot be made, even with the act of reading, and if consistency cannot be built, eventually the reader will leave the text. SNSs function as an umbrella genre in many senses, bringing together a diversity of sub-spaces. If sense cannot quite be made of these spaces (as we have seen earlier, when discussing intertextuality in the context of games and adverts), the act of critique might mean a dismissal and disengagement with that space in the text. Olisha, in critiquing Facebook, reveals a realistic and even limited expectation of what it can offer her. She tells me that “on Facebook you can do things, but you can’t flag them and they’re trying to get a lot of apps on it, but if they’re not genuine, you’re not going to make a difference, so I never join causes or events.”

When the interface disappoints, one option is to switch off. Most have learnt similarly to not look on the right side of their screens, for that is where Facebook inserts its advertisements. Twelve-year-old Ewen puts it succinctly, “Well, I don’t really look at them. I just play these games.” A different kind of strategy with regard to disappointment from the text is displayed by pre-teens Ryan and Belinda, who have entered the world of social networks only recently, with very high expectations of the text. A space for connection, when also a space for unsure stories going around about strange things happening to other children, soon becomes ‘disgusting’. Critique in this case is resourced by

public scripts, and there is an attempt that these children make to spread the word and resist or even prevent something bad from happening:

Ryan: “Someone sent my mum a file. They sent a message and my mum put it all over Facebook saying that, um, this person, um, Harry White and that, um, are just adding little children and don’t accept because they take.... They’re downloading your pictures.”

Belinda: “Harry White who used to be here?”

Ryan: “No, no, no, some other.... And they’re downloading your kids’ pictures, yeah, to sell to perverts and so to make money and it’s just disgusting.”

Belinda: “Horrid.”

So, interpretative work must fill in gaps, anticipate realistically, handle unfulfilled anticipations and devise strategies with which to resolve problems opened up by the text. This, perhaps, is the task of analysis, evaluation and critique. In the final section below, I shift the focus to a more inductive category of task – the task of collaboration.

Play, pleasure and connection in interpretation

Pleasure of collaborating on a social network comes not just from the interface, which presents a range of provisions, but largely from connecting – with the world, with known and unknown others. Strikingly, the stories that follow are not always ones of doing everything together, in a space clearly meant for people to be together, so there are those who enter Facebook just to play games, and those who cannot quite explain what the groups work towards. And more of a puzzle perhaps, but connections with the world are confusing – one child might have 10 siblings, none of whom are related to her by blood, and here, a 13-year-old is married to her classmate. Rishona below explains to me how she is not actually a mother at 13. In an interesting reversal of what was intended to be personal profile information by the text, Rishona and many of her friends have taken it to express bonds of familiarity and solidarity within a peer group:

Rishona: “No, she’s not actually my child. She’s like one of my best friends so I pretend that she’s...a lot of girls have this thing – and guys as well – where they have fake kids like...they wouldn’t say it here but I’m...on Facebook I’m married to one of my friends; I’m married to her. And like they’re not actually my siblings.”

Interviewer: “So why...I mean....”

Rishona: “Because it’s just to show like they’re you’re friends, you know.”

For an older teen, Samuel, this question of connection is more instrumental – for him, it is a contest where one person’s uses of the space must outdo that of others. He tells me that, “joining on Facebook is almost like a competition, although people generally don’t join a group with the idea of saving the world. They join a group with the idea of like I am that, or I was doing that, or I did grow up in the 1990s and watch Prince of Bel Air”. In an interesting exchange below, light banter between 16-year-old Cathy and Sebastian, this friendly rivalry is evident as collaborative connections are contrasted to see whose Facebook space is more ‘happening’:

Sebastian: “You’ve just got a happening Facebook.”

Cathy: “Oh. It’s all right, it’s not the best, but....”

Interviewer: “Is it...? It’s quite happening. It’s a lot more happening than mine.”

Sebastian: “Mine’s better. Yeah.”

Interviewer: “Yours is better?”

Cathy: “Sebastian’s lying.”

Sebastian: “I’m not lying. It’s better ’cause I’ve got more people.”

Cathy: “Yeah, all right. He just looks at pictures of his girlfriend.”

Samuel, Cathy, Sebastian and Rishona collaborate on Facebook and connect with a wide range of diverse others. In both cases the intended purposes of the text have perhaps not quite been followed. A family connections space has been entirely reinterpreted, creating a different version of the family, equally cohesive, less dictated by what is given and more by what network one wishes to create, with its own hierarchies – so the best friend is always the partner and close friends the siblings. In the second case, friending or joining groups has been reinterpreted to move away from a cohesive collaboration to a display of popularity and ties. In both cases, connection and collaboration were

intended, and in both cases, these are doubtless achieved, but this achievement follows a different path from the intended meaning of the text, perhaps.

Collaborative connections are interestingly why families are not welcome on Facebook. Rishona corrects me, for instance, when I suggest that mothers are not welcome Facebook friends because they get to see photos and information posted by their children online, and hence get a view into their children's private lives. Rishona says parents are not welcome because of what others post on your wall, because that cannot be controlled (apparently):

Rishona: "My friend's mum, oh, my God, it's awful, she accepted her mum – this is why you don't want to accept any family. Her mum goes to her photos every day and she finds a photo...like for example, my friend went to a party, my friend doesn't smoke at all, but there were boys that were smoking. Her mum saw the photo and she got...and the girl got branded. So it's kind of like if someone...because you can't control until you've been on Facebook that day, what people have written on your walls. So like...and my friend writes on my wall this long, not true thing, and my mum sees it before I can delete her."

Joining causes and groups are equally interesting because in both cases the overall objective, perhaps, is achieved – a large number of potential connections under a group or cause that professes or supports something. Beneath that, it seems gaps remain. In the case of causes, misinterpretation of why one might wish to join these causes is common across the children I spoke to. A number of explanations were offered, ranging from the saving of lives to the contributions of pennies to make many millions of pounds, tinged with faith as well as scepticism. In the case of groups, some were not entirely sure why they joined a group, but interestingly enough, often the purpose in joining the group was not so much to collaborate with those on it but rather to show public solidarity for the person who had created the group. Collaboration is evident in both cases, but perhaps differently from what seems to be indicated from a surface reading of the textual space. Hence Arthur chooses to not hurt someone's feelings and hence does not ignore group invites from the person:

Arthur: "Because there's one person who just constantly sends me files and stuff, and I don't want Farmville."

Interviewer: "So, why don't you tell him?"

Arthur: "You could ignore the people who send you, like, I think it's like ignore posts from this person in the application, but it's quite harsh, because if you get something good, he'll send it to you, but if not, you miss out on it. So, it's quite...."

So, it is not as if the pursuit of collaborative connections are free of ethics, care and feelings. Indeed, as Martin succinctly points out, Facebook "looks different" during school hours. "When you're ill, you often go on Facebook and there's no one there doing anything. And, then it's completely different. It's really boring". Mutual support and solidarity are central towards making Facebook look different. As 16-year-old Delia points out, "we just like make fun of each other. You just laugh for a good five hours straight. You go on there and you just laugh for the whole five hours. And, it can take your trouble away". And yet, note this discussion between Cathy and Sebastian on another girl named Cathy from their Year group, who is excluded and indeed not treated very nicely in wall conversations between her friends:

Interviewer: "That's another Cathy?"

Sebastian: "Yes."

Cathy: "Yeah, she's fat."

Interviewer: "Oh!"

Cathy: "Sorry, I don't like her. And she's got red hair."

Sebastian: "Yeah, red hair."

Cole explains to me the purposes of a large group – the British Heart Foundation – where he is convinced that the person who started the group (any group) would save the lives of many, as promised. He is connected, committed and engaged, he expects something perhaps even didactic out of the text, and in his faith that these expectations are going to be fulfilled, has not quite worked out how to evaluate what he joins or commits to:

Cole: "You click that, like you can join this group and each person you join will give something to charity, like that."

Interviewer: "So, how does it work, do you think?"

Cole: “Sorry, on the British Heart Foundation, you start a cause, and if you get one million people or 1,000 people or something.”

Interviewer: “Say a million people join, and then?”

Cole: “They’ll probably save 1,000 people’s lives.”

Interviewer: “Who is they?”

Cole: “The people who started it.”

Interviewer: “Who started the group?”

Cole: “Yes.”

As I indicated earlier, joining groups is often an extension of support and solidarity for the person creating the group rather than a commitment towards a shared cause alone. Kelly explains to me that she joins most of her groups as an extension of support more than anything else:

Kelly: “One of my friends is addicted to making, so I...she just makes them, so I’m like okay, I’ll accept.”

Interviewer: “Groups about what?”

Kelly: “Um, like everything, like...”

Bob: “There’s one about the smell of gasoline.”

Kelly: “So like, you know, Roy Daniels of X Factor? Something like 50 requests for a group about him so I was like, oh, okay then, yeah.”

Theoretically relevant findings

The above can be concluded in a variety of potentially valuable ways, framed either around children’s expertise and experiences or around the conceptual repertoire this thesis seeks to understand. The former is offered in the following chapter, and hence that chapter follows concepts. This thesis set out to ask questions of concepts themselves, reframing, revisiting and if necessary revising concepts from audience reception research in the context of an online genre. The last chapter of this thesis does this task – of concluding by visiting concepts that lie at the heart of this project. Three conclusions seem relevant and these will later be developed further.

First, inherited concepts, text and interpretation have been used in this chapter to make sense of children interpreting SNSs. As entry points they seem to have proved fruitful. With the repertoire of anticipations, expectations, interruptions and intertextuality one is able to sufficiently highlight the

centrality of the media itself – Kelly’s ‘Facebook streets’ perhaps – but also indicate the nature of tasks involved in being a literate navigator or one who stumbles. I will follow these concepts in my last empirical chapter, Chapter 8. Second, inherited priorities from audience reception research which connect clearly to the conversation on media and digital literacies prove to be important by connecting resistance, for instance, and the broader task of critique to the demands of being analytical, evaluative and critical users of new media. Third, the notion of interpretation, and by extension, literacies as work, is useful overall, because there is a range of tasks involved in making sense of new media. The horizon of tasks I identified in this chapter, by no means exhaustive, and in many senses theory-led, makes us begin to identify significant parallels between such work for mass media (cf. Liebes and Katz, 1993), but also the range of tasks involved in living a digital everyday life.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I focused on four interlocking and indicative strands of tasks involved in interpretation, in a mix of deductive and inductive reasoning. I selected stories from extreme instances of performing or not performing these tasks, or indeed, performing them differently. The richness of lateral references in readings displayed a weaving of genres and micro-spaces within genres into intriguing narratives of similarities and differences. Tackling negative spaces as interruptions in what could otherwise be a smooth experience of the text reveals divergent strategies in coping with these interruptions. Critique and resistance threw up a variety of potential definitions and only sometimes are they satisfactorily performed, perhaps. Play, pleasure and connection involve different purposes from intended ones of collaboration, and the end products of collaborative engagement often indicate little about what went behind it in the first place. In the end, the task with this chapter was to take apart the precise, although far from exhaustive, aspects of interpretative

work involved in being ‘digitally literate’, outlining also how texts and contexts shape the varying degrees of ‘expertise’ with which these tasks are performed.

In the next chapter, I take a step forward. Having used concepts from audience studies to give me a deductive-inductive frame of tasks involved in the act of interpretation, I now abstract from these discussions – of contexts, divergences and tasks in interpretative work – to perform the task of conceptual analysis of the conceptual tools with which I entered this project. In what follows I reflect on ways in which these tools are useful and ways in which they need extension in order to be retained in the age of the internet.

8. Concepts in interpretation

Introduction

The interpretative logic that has been followed over the course of the last few empirical chapters now demands clarification, as, in this chapter, I move to a more conceptual analysis shaped by the empirical material previously presented. A central aim of this thesis has been to explore the concept of interpretation as understood within audience reception theory, in the context of interactive environments, and the better part of this chapter hence presents an analysis of concepts in interpretation. This thesis presents an analysis of empirical material in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 in a hierarchy, each presenting a specific nature of investigation and analysis, that did not demand a separate segment of the data to be analysed in each section, and nor did it call for a different analysis to be ‘run’ for each. Instead every chapter clarified the analysis approaching the social world with a different purpose in mind. In Chapter 5, my purpose was to approach the social world within which sense is made of the media, seeking similarities, differences and patterns in children’s contextual resources and restraints. The agenda was to outline contextual diversity and difference within which the same text is differentially approached and interpreted. The focus in Chapter 5 was not on the patterns of divergence and difference in interpretation, but rather a description of the contexts within which decoders became agents, where children moved away from being users of a technical interface towards being located in the continuous interplay of structure and agency. This prepared the ground for the Chapter 6, where I sought for evidence of interpretative diversity in ways of significance. In this chapter, I tried to show not only that there were differences in the modes of engagement with a text across a misleading grouping of ‘youthful users’ but also that there were significant moments of consensus. In Chapter, 7, I moved on to unpacking a range of tasks involved

in engaging with an interactive text, drawing on parallels with interpretation for linear, mass-mediated texts. Here, I used illustrations from the social world to unpack key dimensions of interpretation, framed here as work – involving a range of responsibilities and tasks. In this chapter, I devote my attention to a conceptual analysis, which involves abstraction, to reflect on a selected set of concepts that have been at the heart of audience reception theory for many decades. I focus my attention on asking how these and related conceptual tools have been useful in the analysis conducted in this thesis, and in which ways they have proven difficult to employ. The implications of using the language of texts and readers in the age of new media are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

In this chapter, I focus on three related concepts, each of which offers a different perspective on the task of interpretation and which has been conceptually and methodologically significant not only to audience reception studies, over many decades, but has been used in the research design and analysis of a thesis that worked with youthful users of an online genre. Individually the concepts all hail from literary aesthetics, in particular from reception theory and from reader-response criticism; collectively they seem to be of use to a range of fields, the interdisciplinarity of which are evident from the fields brought together in the conceptual framework for this thesis. The first concept I analyse is Wolfgang Iser's (1974) concept of filling gaps in the text. While gap-filling, the broader concept refers to any space in the text left for the user to fill up, it also brings us close to flaws, inconsistencies, intricacies and complexities in the text, which in order to be made sense of must have these gaps 'filled' by the competencies of the reader. The second concept I focus on is Jaus's (1982) concept of the horizon of expectations. Briefly, this indicates how a text is analysed, accessed, interpreted and critiqued by readers in its contemporary literary context, and how with the progress of time, future readers might well approach texts differently. Thus active readers resource

themselves by paying attention to the contextual location of a text in order to engage with it. The third concept I follow is Jauss's concept of the wandering viewpoint. This argues that readers focus on specific segments of the text at specific points in time and their focus must continually change depending on which section of the text they are focusing on at that point.

At this point, one might ask why these concepts are specifically important, because they do not represent the entirety of audience reception theory at all, and are all focused on the interpretative side of the contract. The textual dimension – potentially analysed in the form of a genre analysis, or in terms of openness and closure for narrative texts, and potentially to be extended for non-narrative and non-linear texts – has not been included in this study. This does not, however render the focus on interpretation invalid – as practice, within contexts, and as sense making of textual inconsistencies and gaps. The conceptual analysis that follows, abstracts from the description, evidence and illustration with empirical data presented until this point and begins to reflect on the uneven utilities of these concepts in the age of the internet. This must respond to the key question I have posed about the theoretical and methodological utility of this repertoire. All the three concepts I focus on in what follows, seem to relate to the interpretation side of the interpretative contract. And while they can all be grouped under the umbrella category of the role of the reader, they address themselves to the text, conceptually and methodologically. The concept of gap-filling, as outlined earlier in Chapter 3, indicates that the text has blank spaces left within it which each reader will perhaps fill differently. The concept of the horizon of expectation indicates that readers (in their attempt to make sense of a text and fill its gaps for instance) judge the text in their contemporary cultural (literary, historical) context and approach the text with a range of resources at their disposal. The concept of the wandering viewpoint breaks the task of interpretation down into a range of subsidiary tasks where the reader approaches the text not always as a unified whole but in fragments.

The second concept then provides a context to the text as perceived by the interpreter in the task of interpretation, the third indicates one of the ‘mechanisms’ if one might use the word, of the task of interpretation and the first concept indicates an important aspect of the task of interpretation – that of filling gaps within the text.

Gap filling

In Chapter 3 I drew attention to Wolfgang Iser’s (1974) articulations of expectations, anticipations and consistency building, where the reader activated the text, so to speak, to produce the ‘work’, distinctly different from the text. The notion of gaps – spaces left in the text, to be filled in the act of interpretation – is attendant to Iser’s formulations, and was carried into the social world in this project, by seeking ways in which I could reach users working against textual complexities and uncertainties to either figure a way out, leave the task and in general resolve the problem at hand. The utility, conceptual and empirical, of the notion of filling gaps, can link with my discomfort with the inability of the concept of horizon of expectation to accommodate the task of content creation. I return to this later when discussing the horizon. Iser associates gaps in the text with the idea of indeterminacy, where the text leaves purposes uncertain, and meanings unclear. The task in interpretation is to bring one’s repertoire to the interface and sometimes feel overburdened by the indeterminacies and give up, or to bring down indeterminacy to one’s range of personal experiences (perhaps, what Jauss, 1982 might call the horizon of expectations), and resolve the problem by making it mean something at the individual level. Iser’s own instance of the former is strikingly similar to stories told by many children, in the previous chapters, where they have been so confused or disappointed by outcomes online that they have disconnected, switched off, ceased to participate or told cynical accounts. Iser says, similarly, that the existence of gaps and indeterminacies may

become so burdensome for the reader that the reaction might even be drastic enough to throw the book away.

It is this aspect of indeterminacies that was of particular interest in the analysis presented in the previous chapters. Notice for instance the children's consistent desire to make sense of why things are the way they are, why there has to be someone behind it all, who knew everyone's personal information, why newer functions were copied from one brand to another, and what might be the range of reasons for which the cause and event function often sought to raise money. These are all complexities, answers to which the text does not provide at any level. Or consider the ways in which some disconnect – as an illustrative instance, one might recall the child who decides not to join any civic group online simply because she is convinced there is no clarity in the ways in which they work, or the child who chooses not to have a network of contacts at all because she fears her personal safety and cannot quite work out how to control her privacy settings. These, then, are parallels of throwing the book away when the inconsistencies become too heavy. But more generally, as Iser reminds us, indeterminacies are often resolved at the individual level by bringing to the moment the reader's own resources and life experiences. So, for those who are more persistent than others, fuelled by their own life experiences, the time to throw the book away might never come – consider, for instance, children who persist in working out what many of their peers cannot, having lost dear ones to a disease, research for which they wish to support on the site, or having supported a peer through online bullying, they persist in working out how their protest on the site, against bullying, might actually make a real world difference. These are not easy questions, the answers are not discursively apparent in the interface and many do indeed disengage. But those that persist bring in the reader's own world of experience, as Iser considers it, to resolve the moment of indeterminacy.

But also, gaps in the text give the reader their own opportunity to build bridges and connect different sections of the text, and these bridges made in interpretation diverge across readers. In Iser's opinion, these indeterminacies are not to be regarded as textual flaws because they promote creative responses. And here, a potential extension of the concept comes to mind. What is of creative value in a literary text, when extended to understand the responsibilities and demands made of interpretation by interactive environments, indicates points in the interface where the legibility (cf. Livingstone, 2009) of the site leaves much to be desired. The case of illegible privacy policies, or the exclusivity of conventions where those with different resources are left out of full participation, or even the lack of clarity inherent in many civic spaces in the text, place demands on the user to fill the gaps, build the bridges and make decisions – analysed previously in Chapter 7. However, these also indicate spaces for better clarity, greater inclusivity and higher legibility.

Earlier in this thesis, I had noted how consistency building – the task of weaving everything together in a meaningful whole – is punctuated by moments of doubt, 'as we work out a consistent pattern in the text, we will find our "interpretation" threatened, as it were, by the presence of other possibilities of "interpretation", and so there arise new areas of indeterminacy' (Iser, 1974 p. 287). This has been clearly evident in almost every conversation analysed in the previous chapters. The hesitation in clicking on a hyperlink, the decisions to be made in responding to a 'poke' which, like many other things on the interface, emerge to be a symbolic gesture, the moment of pause in thinking if the box on the right is a targeted advert or something which truly promises a free gift, the critique evident in comparing one brand with another, all represent these punctuations by moments of doubt, where ultimately the act of interpretation pieces a range of resources together, using contextual and individual resources, indicating that the task of being literate with the interface is very far from being

a technical expert. Iser's summary of these tasks works well, it seems, something which guided me in my account of tasks in interpretative work in Chapter 7.

We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. This process is steered by two main structural components within the text: first a repertoire of familiar (literary) patterns and recurrent (literary) themes [...]; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar. (Iser, p. 289)

These gaps, or open spaces in the text, are filled by the competencies of the reader, but the reader, as Radway had noted (1988), could be anyone from someone in a position of privilege to someone battling difficulties on multiple axes. As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, the resources and limits of interpretation are provided by contexts. And contexts – of both text and of reader – establish expectations and anticipations in the task of reading. These anticipations are shaped to a great extent by the contemporary space-time location of the text, an idea grasped by Hans Robert Jauss in his notion of the horizon of expectations.

The horizon of expectations

The acts of reading, viewing, listening and using bring to the moment of the interface (Livingstone, 2008) a range of resources, as previous chapters have indicated. These resources emerge not only from the offerings, affordances and restrictions of textual structure but the repertoire of cultural, socio-historical and contextual resources available to the person interpreting a text. Hans Robert Jauss's notion of the horizon of expectations has been used in this thesis as a conceptual and methodological tool – operationalized into research design and in the interpretative strategy. In this section I reflect on the conceptual utility of the horizon of expectations in understanding interpretative work with an interactive text. Jauss notes that the horizon of the present (the

conditions within which somebody, in the here and now, interprets that which is to be interpreted) and the horizon of the past (the standards, if one will, against which one compares the product one is engaging with) are always in co-existence, and one is incomplete without the other. The implication is that a literate reader, in the very tasks of analysis, evaluation and critique, is not comparing the text at hand to an objective standard set elsewhere, but rather to an entire horizon of expectations and anticipations shaped by what has been experienced before and hence what shapes what is to be expected now. Key questions to consider when thinking through the concept are around authorship – who is behind the text? What can be expected of those authoring the interface? How do these expectations shape one’s experience of the text? Doubtless, it is only in response to these that the tasks of trust (or scepticism), faith (or apathy), evaluation, critique or resistance can be understood.

These questions – of who is behind the interface, how far this authority is to be trusted, and the ways in which it compares with other genres around it – were woven into the research design of this project with the notion of the horizon in mind. If we go back to the analysis of perceptions of authorial presence, discussed earlier, in Chapter 6, we note how, despite the entire interface being user-generated, and despite the blurring of author and reader not only on a SNS, but also Web 2.0 as such, there persists a marked recognition of an author, the creator of the interface. Perceptions of the author differ as does the amount of trust placed in them. For some, noticeably for younger children, we noted how the author tended to be a singular, powerful, figure, one regarding whom expectations were both of fear and awe (that personal data could be accessed and monitored), but also one of faith (that nobody could be rude to anybody on the interface, as somewhere someone had an eye on the whole system). For slightly older children, in their early and mid-teens, we observed how the author as a singular figure shifted rapidly to being a system, a network

somewhere, fallible at times, and often noticed to be copying ideas off other systems, in competition, and yet there seemed to be varying amounts of trust placed in the system.

Jauss reminds us that the horizon itself is constituted by one's experience of parallel texts and genres, bringing us close to the concept of intertextuality. Media worlds are converging, and as the children in this project have revealed, the transitions are rapid, between a games console, multiple windows traversing multiple websites, links to advertising sites, civic support groups and the core interface on which these links link to others. But also, the comparisons are nuanced – recall, for instance, the diverging expectations of multiple articulations of the same genre, where many teenagers reminded me how Myspace could not be expected to be as secure as Facebook, for a range of reasons, none of which were specified at any level by the text itself but rather pieced together in comparison and interpretation. And crucial here, is Jauss's explanation of the link between the past of the text (consider the histories of internet experience in the lives of these children) and the presence of the recipient (consider the conversations and stories they report from the world around them). The illustrations of intertextuality in interpretation provided in Chapter 7 as also the narratives built around the text, presented in Chapter 6, reveal the ways in which horizons work in real, lived practices of use and interpretation. The text is judged in the context of a range of others which form part of its socio-historical context, the conventions of the text are understood as products of contemporary times (note the expectations of dangers online that children approach the text with), and others engaging with the site are positioned in this time and space. All of these factors determine one's own strategies of the ways in which the self is presented in a personal profile, in constructing the image of who one's addressee is, the expectations one can reasonably have of the text and the strategies one can put in place for problems which might need to be resolved.

As the combined analysis presented in Chapters 5 (contexts, resources and restraints), 6 (similarities and differences) and 7 (tasks involved in interpretation) indicates – the very notion of the horizon moves beyond a question of individual tastes and idiosyncrasies or of easily classified predispositions that cluster by demographic axes. While age or class or gender might prove to be an interesting device with which to search for differences in interpretation, the difficulties are considerable as puzzles are not merely exceptions. We saw in this thesis how individual contexts resourced people differently, as did socio-economics, and the similarities of concerns across age – take the case of the unanimous (although differing) perception of an authorial presence – reveal how the very endeavour of investigating horizons must be nuanced between being overly mass or overly individualistic. The horizon of expectations is intertextual, bringing together past and present socio-historical awareness, and the norms and conventions of the interface itself. In a sense, then the text acts as a mediator between ‘past experience and present expectations’ (Jauss, 1988, p. 377). Then, the horizon is part of practice, of identity and of shared experiences.

In comparing Facebook with Myspace and deciding that expectations of each were to be different, or in expecting a protective and powerful author, or sometimes a competitive system of networks behind the interface, in proposing that these interfaces need better privacy controls in light of the times one is in, the notion of the horizon proves a fruitful one to probe out the nuances of what is anticipated from the text and also to interpret what results from engagement with it. The concept is of persistent value. In the context of converging media environments, where one cannot any more cluster anticipations and expectations of a single genre by the generic conventions of that genre alone, and where new genres weave together norms and affordances of pre-existing ones, Jauss’s articulation of the horizon for literary texts, proves interesting:

A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its “beginning” arouses expectations for the “middle and end”, which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text. (Jaus and Benzinger, 1970, p 12)

The discussion above demonstrated that the concept is useful for its flexibility for hybrid genres, its rejection of interpretative divergence merely as a case of individual whims and predispositions, its countering of classifying divergence on the other hand, by mass demographic axes and its subtle positioning of a range of factors – textual conventions, life experiences of the past, contextual resources and restraints of the present – in the production of meaning. Any task, of analysis, evaluation and critique, must necessarily be enmeshed in all of these. One wonders, however, where the horizon takes us on the notion of creation, for contemporary mediated communication places demands on the user to co-create, to generate content and to participate and engage, a significant task is to physically alter texts and create new ones. Is the task of creation also inextricably linked to expectations – if not of textual norms (for one is generating text, in the task of creation) then of expecting and anticipating the requirements of one’s audience, the demands of the genre within which one is implicitly or explicitly trying to place one’s content and an accurate estimation of one’s own competencies. The expectations of reader as author are perhaps (understandably) not immediately available in the notion of the horizon, which emerged as a product of scholarship on literary texts, despite its doubtless utility for understanding new media use and literacies, and there perhaps, a potential for extension in the light of its utility in most other ways.

The wandering viewpoint

As outlined in Chapter 3, Iser, writing from the Konstanz school in Germany, developed a range of concepts, borrowing from the phenomenological theory of art to account for dynamics in the reading process. The wandering viewpoint is one such concept, which places the reader within the text, and has been taken up in the conceptual and methodological aspects of this thesis. It has proven both useful and difficult to work with, perhaps more difficult to work with than the previous concepts I focused on. The concept demands in brief that there is a wide referential field used by the reader, constantly switching between different parts and aspects of the text. For Iser, writing for literary texts, these fragments are automatically sentences – and hence we shall see how the concept was and can possibly be extended further. Iser notes that in the act of reading, the reader approaches every new fragment of the text with pre-conceived anticipations and expectations, and while every such sentence is an event of interpretation in itself, it is shaped by the fulfilment and frustration associated with what went before. The consequence, overall, is that the reader attempts to build some sort of consistency between textual sections or fragments in order to grasp the sense of the text.

The wandering viewpoint seemed useful, when designing the theory-led interview guide, for visualizing the interface as an amalgamation of distinct fragments. At the outset I did away with the notion that these fragments must be successive, or in some way sequential, for they could well be experienced simultaneously. The experience of the wall on Facebook need not precede or succeed in any fixed direction the experience of photos albums or of commenting on others' status update messages. Moreover, every one of these sections of the text was woven into other sections in physically evident ways. And yet, the text was not a monomodal, linear space, and similar to the premise of difference across sentences built into the concept of the wandering viewpoint, the

interface presented itself with marked differences across these fragments, each raising a different set of anticipations and expectations and each demanding a slightly different mode of engagement.

Three related aspects of the notion of the wandering viewpoint stood out in analysis and interpretation. First, that interpretation demands specific anticipations from specific aspects of the text, visualized by Iser as textual sections. Second, that these anticipations are fulfilled or frustrated and all contribute to some version of whole. Third, that it is only across all of these components that readers find a text consistent and hence satisfactory. In the analysis presented in Chapter 6, of engaging textual boundaries, I noted how those who have high expertise with the interface in one aspect, or who push textual boundaries creatively or subversively in some aspects, are also active in others. The analysis revealed how frustration with one aspect of the text – consider the case of causes for world events, the real purpose of which could not always be grasped by the children – leads to stumbling against that specific section of the site, but is almost always balanced by different expectations and their fulfilment in other sections, and overall, the interface remains satisfactory.

Iser uses phenomenological concepts such as protention and retention in explaining the idea of the viewpoint. Here, protention indicates the projection of wishes, expectations and anticipations (discussed earlier in Chapter 3) on to every new step and retention indicates the shaping of these expectations by what has gone before. So the more a text disappoints, the more one carries this disappointments into future engagement with it, perhaps – recall here, the case of children who were convinced that the interface was highly unsafe, problematic or deceptive, or those who refused to engage in civic activities on the interface, having been disappointed earlier. Interestingly enough, the notions of protention and retention keep bringing us back to the idea of legibility of texts in order for people to be able to be literate with them (cf. Livingstone, 2009). So, if a text is perceived to be

disappointing, unclear on where it takes the reader, and if these disappointments and frustrations are not sources of curiosity to explore further, there is perhaps little merit in placing the blame on inefficient literacies.

This perhaps moves us away from the original sense in which the concept of the wandering viewpoint was proposed. The sentence structure of literary texts, especially narrative texts, is extremely difficult to rework for interfaces such as these, because it is almost impossible to grasp what really is to be the unit – every page is embedded with links that lead to other links, each pathway tracing out an array of possible expectations, anticipations, fulfilments and frustrations. But perhaps the focus in Iser's argument was not quite that the text must in some way be divided into sequential fragments, but that comprehending and finding the whole satisfactory was dependent upon many sub-'events' in the process of engagement with the text, each of which placed its own demands on the reader, each of which fulfilled or frustrated anticipations in some way, and collectively they all led to an experience of the entire interface.

As the analysis presented in Chapter 6, on stories collected and retold about the text, or in the illustrations showed in Chapter 7, on the ways in which problems are resolved or succumbed to, memory (of past events, past frustrations and others' experiences) and expectations (in turn, guided by these memories) interact to produce the wandering viewpoint. The analysis also revealed that different sections of the text have different purposes to solve for many. It remains unclear, however, whether the concept is useful beyond this point for interactive, non-linear, non-narrative interfaces. Consider the case of children who engage with the interface only for gaming, or those who use only the chat function. For many of these children, as analysis in previous chapters has shown, the interface comes to mean that one and only function, and their expectations or experiences of the

rest of the interface do not quite matter. Hence, perhaps, the difficulties of operationalizing a concept ideated for linear, monomodal narrative texts in the context of something like a SNS.

The contract of interpretation

By this point, it is evident that this thesis, despite having positioned its conceptual repertoire with the metaphor of the contract, between the text and the reader, has devoted itself solely to the analysis of interpretative work and interpretative divergence. But the text has featured, not through a singular analysis presented at the outset, ahead of the analysis of interpretative work, but rather as a consistent and identifiable thread feeding through the empirical chapters. In framing the analysis as tasks to be performed, for instance Chapter 7, or in locating the reasons children put forward for perceiving an author, for connecting, or disconnecting, the demands placed and the possibilities afforded by the text can be perceived, but only through the eyes of the user. This stance might be open to both theoretical and methodological critique. In Chapter 3, I outlined a very interdisciplinary range of concepts around the metaphor of the contract, only a select few of which I was able to provide abstractions for, in any significant detail, and those few have by now been discussed. In this brief section, I indicate other concepts, introduced earlier, and which have been a part of the research design of this thesis – specifically important in two methodologically significant moments in the research process, that is, the design of the interview guide and the evolution of the coding framework. The role of concepts at both these moments has been discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Openness and closure, albeit admittedly developed for fiction and narrative texts, seem to be useful concepts. Leaving aside the complexities of transporting concepts designed for narrative texts into

understanding interactive non-linear and heterarchical environments, the core idea of openness and closure remain significant. Much like Eco's (1979) articulation that most texts fall between fully open and fully closed, it is as clear as for interactive interfaces as for linear, narrative texts, that texts do indeed make certain readings more available than others. If a textual analysis had been attempted for this thesis, this repertoire might have turned the analysis presented in Chapter 6, on interpretative diversity, and in Chapter 7, on the range of tasks involved in interpretation, on its head, by pointing out how these roles have been varyingly anticipated (or not) in the design of the interface itself. Note where Eco says 'an open text cannot be described as a communicative strategy if the role of its addressee (the reader, in the case of verbal texts) has not been envisaged at the moment of its generation qua text. An open text is a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantic pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process' (1979, p. 3). The analysis of tasks in interpretation as presented in Chapter 7 when reversed might bring us interestingly close to the idea of the implied reader or the implied user. So, we might ask, has the text been designed to project an image of the author such that almost every user presented a perception of authorial presence? Have the capacities of the user to transcend the collaborative spaces offered by the text and use it in a range of divergent ways been presumed by the structure of the interface, and if so, how efficient has this been? This all also brings us close to the concept of affordances which shape appropriation such that the range of uses/interpretation remains finite (although this is open to debate). An analysis of the text in terms of openness or closure would lead us close enough to the idea of genre – where an analysis of the norms and conventions that make up a distinctive interface, simultaneously weaving together, as Kress (2001) pointed out, other features from pre-existing genres – would meet the analysis conducted in this thesis of users approaching the interface from a horizon of intertextual expectations, for instance, or would help delineate the gaps that users filled in their interpretative

work. These concepts are all a significant part of the analysis presented but might, as I indicated in this section, well be extended for a textual analysis.

As the section on the role of critique in interpretation in Chapter 7 shows, interpretation implicitly and explicitly involves guessing potential manipulations and authorial persuasion (consider the analysis of anticipating authorial presence in Chapter 6), and selecting, with creative agency, textual elements that speak (or not) to the user. So, if the conventions of the genre have been anticipated as being manipulative, recognized as being persuasive, expected to intersperse ‘friend feeds’ with adverts, users, with advanced literacies may even resist textual manipulation. But embedded in conventions are also the limits posed by legibility, and hence, the value of the ‘contract’ – it affords a relationship of mutuality between resources/restraints in the text and the interpretative work of the user.

Accounting for interpretative diversity

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the achievements and critiques of audience reception studies over the past decades. Interestingly most critiques seemed to have accumulated around one of the field’s most significant achievements, and that is, interpretative divergence. The empirical investigation of interpretative diversity was enriched by psychological accounts (which were said to have reduced a rich process to individual cognitive processes), culturally theorized accounts (where context shaped the meanings derived out a text) and sociological perspectives (where demographic attributes emerged to be significant). This all helped establish clearly that interpretative work was not only divergent across convenient groupings, but that in many cases, these dissimilarities between audience interpretations were of significance. The critique, that empirical research investigating this could well accumulate over decades, from various cultural locations, but how far would they be presenting a

novel finding, remained strong. The response would then be that interpretative resources and processes are interesting to the study of communicative situations in any case. But more importantly, perhaps, one needs to account for the similarities and differences highlighted in previous chapters, but especially in the analysis presented in Chapter 6. Can divergence so easily be mapped onto age or any other single attribute? How far has this stance neglected the shaping influence of gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity and so on, and hence would an alternative analysis produce an entirely different set of similarities and differences? Moreover, would a different set of children have presented different results?

Doubtless, these questions are all significant, and yet the fact remains that following certain themes – an existence of authorial perception, an image of other users, the existence of a range of strategies to help cope with problems – gave me, in my analysis, moments of convergence, which I followed as thematic sections in analysis. In each of these moments of convergence, there were clearly divergent stances evident. Recall, for instance, the perceptions of authorial presence – something that came up in conversations with almost all the children. Yet, there was a marked shift in the image of the author as a singular powerful figure who was also a figure in whom faith could be placed, to the author, at the oldest end of the spectrum as a network of systems, competing for business ‘out there’, alongside a range of others. As horizons of expectations and anticipations widen with age, older teens are better prepared to contextualize the genre in a range of others. But our ‘exceptions’ indicate to us precisely how accounting for divergence is far from simple. Girls, even when older, were more concerned than boys about questions of authorial power, for instance, and those with creative competencies always torn between a desire to improve Facebook for the affordances it provided and an inability to change things significantly. Those who had experienced problems with the text in the past, which they felt violated their privacy, or had jeopardized their

safety, presented more careful forays into the text than others. In other words, context matters. This list could go on, and the finding that context matters is as such of little novelty. But perhaps this many decades-old priority of audience reception studies is important to retain in the face of conversations around youthful expertise with online media, where once again, the conversation often seems to shift to accounts tilted towards homogeneity, losing sight of not only diversities and dissimilarities, but also why they might be significant.

It is important to note that in locating heterogeneity in children's accounts of the genre, I have sought out minute differences. Consider the case of the mediation of relationships, discussed in both Chapters 5 and 6. I noted how younger children often bring home and family connections from the offline world into the online as they confide in, trust and share with those around them, often adults. This says quite a lot about the way in which relationships of trust build around the text. There were also stories of how online relationships could be graded in a range of ways, using the symbolic resources offered by the interface – the expression of hate might signal a relationship of love, the declaration of siblinghood might indicate a relationship of friendship and in turn exclude those not listed as siblings, the return of a gesture online or the absence of reciprocation might indicate closeness or distance. I also drew attention to how the task of engagement and participation is shaped to an extent not only by the clarity of the interface in question, but also by one's own life experiences. Clearly, therefore, age or class or gender is merely one or some of many possible axes along which to seek diversity in engaging with a text. And these are significant because they propose explanations for a range of things – perceived disconnection and disengagement, perceived lack of literacies to evaluate a text critically, or uniformity in engaging with the world on the interface. They are also significant because they signal important moments of consensus, as I have already outlined.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have abstracted from the empirical, to reflect on a selection of the core conceptual tools that have been animated in this thesis in both research design as well as analysis and interpretation. I indicated how the notion of the horizon of expectations is an excellent device with which to make sense of the cultural resources and competencies, individual as well as collective, brought to moment of engagement with the text. I showed how the notion of horizon helps us accommodate the range of resources (far from simply technical) that are used in developing analytical, evaluative and critical competencies with the media. And yet, the notion remains inadequate to employ for understanding the creative and heterarchically authored nature of much contemporary mediated communication. The notion of gap filling, I noted, is an excellent resource that helps us keep media and audience, text and reader, interface and user in the same frame. In this thesis, by using it in an analysis of interpretative work, I was able to draw attention to gaps in the text as identified by users themselves, and in that sense, it provided a methodological way out of the dilemma of establishing a singular textual analysis which would shape the analysis of interpretation and misinterpretation. By extension from its original sense, the act of filling gaps can be made to incorporate the task of creation; not only in the act of filling pre-existing gaps, but in authoring content, in creating texts, the act of creating gaps and indeterminacies is a potentially useful way in which to examine the generation of content and representations by users themselves. In analysing the utility of the wandering viewpoint I noted how the concept is useful in its proposition of protection and retention which involves anticipations and expectations of different segments of the text – useful for an interface such as a SNS which brings together a range of different genres and platforms, and yet remarkably difficult to employ for non-fiction texts. I reviewed the findings on interpretative diversity, and drew attention to the contextual shaping of it, and outlined why this

central priority of audience reception studies continues to be relevant, as long as we follow questions of significance.

Why and how might all of this matter? Throughout this thesis, while the thrust has been to analyse a set of interviews with youthful users of an online interface, the narrative that I sought to sustain throughout is one that connects differently mediated communicative situations. I have argued in every chapter for the extension, retention and revision of a set of repertoires and concepts from one moment of mediated communication to another. As outlined in Chapter 1, at the heart of this thesis lay an ambition of researching the notions of audience interpretation in the context of use in interactive environments. In the next and final chapter I respond to the task set up in Chapter 1, by looking at active viewers and interpretative users in the same frame, positioned aptly with a cross-generational perspective that connects not only distinct phases in media and communications research, but also a range of mediated communicative conditions.

9. Connecting interpretative conditions

This thesis has argued for the extension and revision of the text-reader metaphor from audience reception analysis in the age of the internet. In so doing, it has prioritized the reception theory-led approach to meaning and interpretation, and it might appear that it has thus written out of the record of audience research the wide range of various other approaches which have not only proven equally productive but have also already smoothly transferred across communicative conditions. This task – of connecting communicative conditions, whether through the agenda of refining our conceptual repertoires, by identifying and pursuing shared priorities or by cross-fertilizing our resources, across disciplinary boundaries – cannot be undertaken by a single researcher or a single project. My attempt in this thesis was thus to conceptualize a framework derived from reception aesthetics, as it has been used within the rather empirical domain of reception analysis, and to observe what these concepts go through as they are transported into a rather different communicative condition from the one in which they were originally conceptualized. Returning to the point about the selective nature of this attempt, one might note that the theoretical framework I constructed at the outset did not take off from the rich psychoanalytical theories around the role of the spectator, or the possibilities and restraints offered to the field by gratifications research, or the anthropological richness offered to the field by many decades of ethnographic work. These all, we might also note, have, in their own ways, spanned differently mediated communicative conditions. So, for instance, there are researchers who study youthful cultures online (see, for instance, the work being contributed from gender studies). Similarly, as suggested here, we might also perhaps draw a

link between theorizing spectators and readers and theorizing users, although all of these beg for empirical work.

A personal account

So, it is interesting, I suggested in this thesis, to think across communicative situations, carrying concepts with us on the way. I began this thesis with a personal account, which it might, at this point, be fruitful to recall. In Chapter 1, I said how:

...the first three texts I read in audience research inspired me to think of a project that would research the *interpretations of genres* – one which would look at the mutuality, movement, action and engagement in the text-reader relationship. My very first piece of reading on empirical audience research – *Making Sense of Television* (Livingstone, 1998a) continues to influence me as I write a thesis on users and social networking sites, for it reminds me of the centrality of genre and the centrality of interpretation in any moment of mediated communication. The second piece, which I read shortly after, *The Export of Meaning* (Liebes and Katz, 1993) embedded the concept of references, associations and mutual aid in my mind, and the third, *Reading the Romance* (Radway, 1984), showed me how texts and readers worked in contexts. All these concepts from research done with one-way mass media return time and again throughout this thesis that works with users of the internet.

In writing this thesis, these initial moments of inspiration emerged to be part of an on-going cross-generational conversation where I have had the opportunity to reflect not only on the empirical work conducted in this thesis that tried to link interpretation with use, but also to contextualize it within a broader history of audience research. In conversation with Sonia Livingstone, an account pondering the ‘end of audiences’ has emerged (Livingstone and Das, in prep.), where we ask not

only what has changed and what remains stable between the generation of audience researchers coming of age now, and those who came of age in the 1980s, but also in asking similar questions, which are the best ways in which to cross-fertilize a range of different areas of research. In our paper, we say:

Once, ordinary people occupied their leisure time sitting on the sofa, often together with others, watching prescheduled hours of mass broadcast television, and those researching their activities spoke of textual syntax, agency, patterns of consumption, resistance to manipulative messages or problematic representations and so forth. Increasingly, audiences supplement such moments by sitting, generally alone, in front of the computer so as to multitask music downloading, peer to peer chat, social networking, information searching and participation in multi-user games or civic forums. And, those researching their activities speak of technological affordances, hybridity, individualized appropriation and collaborative use. What has changed between then and now, and more importantly, what, in our understanding of the activities of the people on the sofa, may illuminate our knowledge of those who navigate the World Wide Web? Our paper asks therefore, whether the insights of audience reception research, have anything to offer the imperatives of analysing today's users as they engage with Web 2.0 interfaces and also, whether the metaphors of texts and readers, encoding and decoding, genres and interpretation, are as insightful in the world of interactive media as they were for mass media.

(Livingstone and Das, in prep.)

This – in brief – inspired the narrative that runs through this thesis, for it helped bring together communicative conditions, which are distinctively different – in terms of affordances, technological conventions, the shape of texts and practices of use, and yet these conditions are dynamically intertwined around relationships of mutuality between the interpreter and that which is interpreted. These questions are as yet still part of a largely analytical literature, with ample scope for empirical research. Provoked by these questions, and guided by the continuing relevance of many concepts from reception studies in the age of networked media, in this thesis I suggested that one might revisit a conceptual repertoire from audience reception analysis for the study of new media use, focusing on the mutuality of texts and readers across distinctly different communicative moments from mass-mediated to interactive times. Drawing from the paired concepts of texts and readers, we notice remarkable similarities in terms of relationships of co-construction in diverse fields – affordances and appropriation, legibility and literacy, technology and use – where each element in a pair defines, shapes, resources and restrains the other. Collaborative projects, international conferences, research articles and classroom conversations are marked by a curiosity, at once conceptual and empirical, about the transmogrification of audiences into users (Hartley, et al 2007), for as we move from one mediated moment to another, the demands of electronic communication are fast replaced by the demands of a networked, fragmented media environment.

Differently realized texts or just different practices of use?

In theorizing the role of the reader, Eco (1979) opened his account by asking if reading texts differently helped produce texts in turn. Extending the question, we might ask if the findings from the empirical work in this thesis merely indicate diversity in practices of use (as much else in the field at the moment will also verify), or if there are different texts being produced in realization, that is,

interpretation? At the solely physical level of texts, indeed the texts encountered in this thesis are what Fiske (1988) would call ‘producerly’ texts for the viewer (substitute user) is invited to write into it at very many points. This is not merely a question of filling in textual gaps, but rather the text is created in cooperation with the reader, which might then, even if solely for the sake of argument, generate more gaps to be filled, thereby creating the conflation of reader and author that exists for user-generated content in the age of interactive media. Why then, in the section on divergence and consensus, did I spend some time focusing on the notion of an author or perceptions of authorial presence? I did so because the writing into the text or producing a text in user generation of content does not, at least for websites such as these, happen in an entirely un-directed or directionless manner. There is a structure, reminiscent of Allen’s governing set of structural principles (1985), that shapes, if not governs, what can or cannot be written into a text, and what I was interested in was the range of ways in which children perceived these principles, and by extension, the ways in which these perceptions activated the text differently. I argue that the findings in this thesis do not merely show up differences in use practices, or that the fact that pre-teens were found to anticipate a larger than life figure as author despite all promises of creating their own content, simply tells us that different social and cognitive resources or different social histories make for different tendencies in use. The text that is ‘realized’ by Alison, for instance, is replete with worries about disgusting things, used and written into with utmost caution and high amounts of self-censorship, held almost no expectations of and talked about in ways that mirror this scepticism and even disgust. The text that enters her oral culture is therefore a rather different text from Fritz’s, whose text, using a similar level of technical knowledge, and rather similar concerns about negative practices online, becomes an arena for multiple new possibilities and potential – for spreading news and views, generating awareness and for raising support for particular causes. The text that enters his oral culture is one of possibilities and creative potential. Social histories matter, clearly, as the different life experiences of

these early teens shape the different realizations of the text. This finding is corroborated by decades of research with media audiences, explaining why some of Radway's viewers (1985) identified more with one character instead of another, for instance, supporting the argument that the theory of audiences extends from television and film to the world of the interactive. And this finding says something to us about the differential realization of even producerly texts, that some people do this and others do that.

In Chapter 6 I argued for these different texts produced in realization. In asking which similarities and which differences matter, I opened myself out to the potential critique that often one might, in such endeavours, over-celebrate difference and over-interpret acts of resistance and critique. Yet, as I argued earlier, there is a case to be made for different analytical choices, different socio-historical resources in making those choices, and a different outcome being produced as a consequence of reading. Why should we seek patterns, then, if every reading of every individual produces a different text? As my findings showed earlier, not all themes in seeking divergence and consensus demonstrated an equally striking range of differences and divergence, and hence, not every activated text is different from every other in every sense. What shapes the criss-crossing of similarities and differences between these activated texts gives us cultural resources, demographic attributes, divergent life experiences and histories along which we cluster our 'findings'. In discussing divergence, my first theme – authors, other readers and stories about the text – had asked how perceptions of an 'author' behind the text, and perception of 'others' who also interface with the text, differ. My findings in thinking through differently realized or activated texts have shown that an engagement with the authors and other readers persists throughout teenage years – which is, the point in consensus – and yet these perceptions modify significantly as experience with life and with the genre increases. This theme is important because it brings to the conversation the question of

(perceived) power not only between what is interpreted and those who interpret, but also others who interpret and the author of what is to be interpreted.

In tracing stories told about the text, I focused on how these differently activated texts circulate in children's oral cultures, and how in turn these circulations themselves shape potential future readings. These stories are selected from the social world, from conversations amongst others and in the media, and often the stories are personal. They represent experiences and perceptions that are brought to the text and consequently shape the nature of engagement. The text is 'used' in many senses to demarcate boundaries in relationships, to indicate degrees of openness and closeness, to manage the nature of relationships and often to mirror what exists in the social world. In analysing how textual boundaries are engaged, I followed affordances and appropriation introduced earlier, and of gaps and gap filling, to ask if there were patterns in the ways in which textual offerings were recognized, used, pushed and sometimes broken free off in significant ways. These ways could be any mix of the creative, subversive, experimental or even banal. This theme explored the ways in which a text was contextualized in its financial and cultural location in space and time, and how some connected when others didn't, or even how being online on a social network did not necessarily mean one was connecting with others. While this all seems largely about divergence, the themes itself show moments of consensus, reiterating that differently realized texts intersect at different moments, producing different outcomes than ones written into the making of a text, even if the text was physically as 'producerly' as a text could be.

The language of texts and readers

In this chapter, and indeed throughout this thesis, I have used the language of texts and readers when analysing interviews with users of SNSs. This is unsatisfactory at a number of levels. First, the

metaphor of the text conjures the image of a singular text, written and archived in some kind of stability, which the reader is then free to interpret, in a range of ways. Decades of research with audiences of mass-mediated print and broadcast media have used the metaphor of the text to analyse programmes, tapes or records which have been reviewed repeatedly by textual analysts to look for strategies of representation, modes of address and discursive tropes. Considerable difficulty arises, however, every time one refers to ‘the text’ for SNSs, or many other Web 2.0 genres for instance, because the text here is in eternal flux, changing with user-generated content every moment. The metaphor of the text has a problem at another level, which is in terms of research. The tendency in much of audience reception studies to provide an analysis of the text somehow establishes the text (in fact, the researcher’s own interpretation of the text, and its potential gaps and possibilities) as the singular text ‘out there’, which the audience shall now comprehend and/or interpret. In this thesis, by avoiding this step – of providing an account of the text, as if it were the pre-requisite of understanding interpretative work – I have tried, albeit in a less than satisfactory way, to escape the problem of the singular text. In analysing interpretation, though, note that I have drawn attention to gaps and inconsistencies or puzzles and road blocks which have been indicated by users themselves. The third problem with the metaphor of the text is not so much a problem of the metaphor itself but the tools around it that have been at the heart of audience reception studies, and have, in turn, been mobilized for this thesis. Some of these tools were developed addressing fiction. There is an argument to be made, that importing them into the analysis of non-narrative and indeed non-fictional texts might prove to be a difficult or even unnecessary endeavour. Finally, the metaphor of the text automatically assumes the parallel metaphors of author and reader. I shall come to the problems with the reading metaphor shortly, but the problems with ‘author’ in Web 2.0 are immediately evident when much content is generated by users in a networked, often anonymous, and almost always collaborative and heterarchical way. So four problems seem prominent with the

metaphor of the text in the context of interactive Web 2.0 – the instability of Web 2.0 texts, the dangers of establishing a singular text with its singular textual analysis, waiting to be mis/interpreted by those who engage with them, the inefficiency of analytical tools designed for fictional and narrative texts, and the complexities of the attendant notion of author.

The problems associated with reading/reader too are considerable. First, and at the simplest level, reading cannot account for a whole range of activities one performs in using the media, but perhaps, in audience reception studies, in extending reading as a critical, engaged, interpretative task (note the quote from Iser which formed the basis of Chapter 7), we have successfully extended reading to mean the combination of viewing, reading, listening, using and so on. Reading also implies that there is a text to be read, as does the term literacy. The co-creation of texts, and the creation of texts in the very act of reading itself is perhaps not quite grasped within the theoretical repertoires associated with reading as imagined in the conceptual framework mobilized for this thesis. For many, reading implies a certain passivity, where the act of physically altering texts is not implied, and without this, the entire range of activities in the Web 2.0 world is impossible to theorize. And then, with the text-reader metaphor (although one must doubt if this is a flaw that has anything to do with the metaphor itself, or whether this has something to do with the way the metaphor has largely been used), there is the problem of the limitless polysemy of texts and the concurrent undermining of textual power.

These problems were all encountered in the course of this project, and call for reflection. In arguing for retention of the text-reader metaphor, without a substantial extension of the metaphor to be able to conceptually accommodate the task of creation, there is little value in carrying it forward for empirical analysis of use in interactive environments. This task of extension and revision is clear. We

need a way in which to be able to retain the substantial theoretical (and by extension methodological) merit in reader-oriented theories of meaning, and this retention is only feasible once we have refined and extended these theoretical resources, as indicated in this chapter. The problems indicated in operationalizing the concept of horizons, viewpoints or gaps and gap filling can potentially be extended to any of the concepts that I have been unable to fully operationalize or make use of in the interpretative task in this thesis.

This brings me to reflect on why this retention and the language of texts and readers has been useful, not only in the discussion of empirical work in this thesis, but also, why the text-reader metaphor is of significance for making sense of engagement with the interactive world. First, the metaphor implies a relationship of mutuality, which is not only inherent in the very notion of reception but also in that of use and literacies, where use automatically implies the existence of something to be used, with its set of affordances (Hutchby, 2001), norms and conventions, with an implied reader (cf. Woolgar, 1991) often established. In my analysis of interviews with children in the preceding chapters, we saw how these conventions were sometimes exclusive, how they could be transgressed, even if only symbolically (consider the case of listing friends as family), how they could be compared (note how different versions of the genre were compared and contrasted), how they were anticipated (recall the diverging expectations of Facebook and Myspace), and how the norms of the interface were used strategically (consider the analysis presented under problem solving in Chapter 7). The metaphor thus accommodates a set of conditions, which are doubtless inherent in the interface itself, which, if it were to be abandoned in the name of celebrating user-generated content, would also take away the resource with which to spot these very areas of mutuality in use. As a methodological observation, the metaphor provided a smooth translation, if one will, of the conceptual priorities of audience reception studies into the social world where interactive interfaces

are being used, and the clearest way in which I can demonstrate this, perhaps, is in the conceptualization of the interview guide, discussed in Chapter 4. Texts and readers operate within contexts, the metaphor demands a recognition of what is permitted by the interface, it helps us grasp a range of activities that struggle within and against these permissions, that sometimes transgress and break free of imaginable actions and that create meaning in ways that are neither reducible to individual whims nor generalizable on strictly demographic parameters.

Alternative approaches?

There is a range of ways in which this all could have been approached differently. First of all, as the thesis title indicates, I have steadfastly assumed a distinction between audiences and users, by setting up my task as such. By saying I am carrying insights from one condition of mediation to another, in order to accomplish a task of connection, I have constructed what might appear to be a divide that did not exist in such clarity, which might have eliminated the need for connection in the first place. As my discussion on media literacy has shown, and indeed, as is evident in the individual and collective research agendas of scholars who research changing audiences, perhaps the audience research agenda is already enmeshed in the age of the internet, and perhaps the audience is no longer a construct tied to a specific technological condition which is mass-mediated. Second, I have done away with a textual analysis in this thesis. Unwilling from the outset to conduct and present my account of 'the text', following which I would present accounts of interpretative work, I acknowledge that an in-depth investigation of gaps, modes of address, composition (see the analysis by Livingstone, 2007, for instance, of the epal.tv website) in terms of genre, would have been interesting. Instead, I chose to focus on gaps, indeterminacies, inconsistencies and problems in the text as presented by users themselves. This cannot, and is not intended to, replace the role of textual analysis in an account that speaks of the interpretative contract, because a contract is necessarily

between those who interpret and what is interpreted. Interestingly enough, and perhaps this is a key critique of the analysis presented here, ‘the text’ ran through this entire thesis in a rather selective fashion. The text, for me, seemed to be the interface – the design, the pop-ups, the advertisements, the games and the applications – but what, one might ask, about the role of user-generated content? Is that not text, for that is what fills out the ‘system’ I have focused on? Third, I adopted the reception theory inroad into audience research, and it may seem that I have reduced a very wide and diverse body of work into a specific set of conceptual tools which, when productive, are surely not the only way in which to either summarize the conceptual insights of audience research or analyse the usage practices of the interpretative user. Thus, this attempt is one of a range of possible ones – ones that foreground textual analysis when working out a better way around inadvertently, in analysis, establishing a single text, than eliminating textual analysis altogether, and ones that bring to this task of connecting communicative conditions an alternative repertoire of concepts. There are risks, too, in following the demographic patterning (Schroder et al, 2003) of interpretation, for in prioritizing one demographic axis (in the case of this thesis, age), one necessarily ignores other interesting axes of difference. What would this analysis have looked like had the focus been on gender, or class? In this final chapter, I now conclude by responding, in a sense, to the agenda set out in Chapter 1. I contextualize my attempt in the backdrop of the changing field of audiences and audience research and seek to outline theoretical and methodological possibilities for the future.

Ways forward

In this thesis, I have pursued a range of concepts which have proven, despite difficulties in employing them, to be useful. I explored these concepts in a project to do with the users of new

media, showing how texts and readers, technologies and users are embedded in relationships of mutuality. So, can we then say that user researchers might fruitfully return to or reference the work of their colleagues within audience reception studies, who have, over the past fifty years, explored empirical audiences and theorised their interpretive work? And then, how can existing research with users incorporate perspectives from audience studies? Can we also then respond to the reverse question – can we begin to think of a range of potential ways in which audience researchers might begin to incorporate the study of users within their work? Which new projects might be imagined? In concluding this thesis, I begin to explore some of these directions. For the first question, I argue that it is not only the concepts lying at the heart of audience reception studies which are of constructive use in the world of users (as I have tried to show in this thesis) but also that the empirical priorities established over the last few decades of researching audiences must truly not be lost sight of in research with new media bloggers, gamers, content producers, networked collaborators. In response to the latter, I argue that, in a less than well-articulated manner, much of what audience research has pursued over the years is already, in fruitful ways, entering new projects, new endeavours, new conference papers and much interesting future research seems likely.

It seems that unlike audience research, research with users happens in many fields even outside of media and communications. And the user is conceptualised differently by these fields, sometimes theorised and sometimes empirically pursued but not really theorised as such. So it is not only communications studies journals that carry research with users of new media, but also those in literacy and education studies, information systems research, human computer interaction, cybernetics research and so on, and each of these fields have their own established priorities. Literacy studies have a strong focus on questions of textuality, visibility, authorship, learning and writing, information systems bring perspectives on organisational procedures, software, hardware,

data processing, human computer interaction focuses on the front between the user and a technical interface with an eye on problems, errors, consistencies and inconsistencies, media and communications research looks at a wide range of questions from micro-level pursuits of sub-cultures, questions of gender, ethnicity, power and identity to macro-level analyses of the economics behind large scale networks, questions of access, and of course this feeds into policy-relevant research. Unlike audience research, research with users did not really have to encounter a strong tradition of denying agency to the user, as for instance audience research did at the outset in the face of powerful media – powerless audience hypotheses. Also, while a diverse range of streams fed into audience research, as outlined earlier in this thesis, the audience from media and communications did not really find space in other disciplines, as for instance the user did.

So indeed, it is not a question of a happy convergence between audience studies and user studies, simply because their histories and presents are far too diverse and it is difficult to cross-fertilise, if not impossible. But it seems from a review of the latest research with users, that perspectives from audience research may indeed be of use. I have explained throughout this thesis, how a set of concepts framed along the relationship of mutuality of texts and readers can prove useful for understanding the mutuality between users and media technologies. So also, the priorities of empirical audience research – of seeking divergence between what is interpreted and one who interprets, of establishing how such divergence is linked to resistance and of seeking divergence between and across audiences must remain useful surely to the researcher of new media users. And yet, the many decades of empirical audience research remain deleted from journal articles that deal with the new media user. Are contexts of consumption, relations of power, the gendering of media engagement to be theorised anew?

Outside of media and communications research, researchers of human computer interaction conduct studies of sense-making in collaborative environments, often involving the design of new tools (Paul and Morris, 2011). Ronkainen et al (2011) present a practical approach to analysing mobile usage. Their focus lies on challenges to user's capabilities. Ryu and Monk (2009) describe a pragmatic approach to interaction-modeling is presented with which one can describe how a user achieves their ends with a newly developing system. Gestures involved in a video-mediated collaborative assembly task are followed by Leila Alem and Jane Li (2011). As I have indicated earlier, errors in this interaction between interface and user and significant and some, for instance, Traver (2010) elaborate why compiler errors messages make the work of programmers difficult, and how this situation can be resolved. The user in this all seems to exist out of context – the interface between technology and a socio-historically isolated user is of paramount importance, and perhaps here, the cultural approach to the relationship between what is interpreted and who interprets is of use? In some research with information systems, including also research that is carried in journals of media and communications studies, the system and the user are of importance. So, for instance, Kim et. al (2010) focus on the system as they try to organize the status, uses, and issues of social Web sites into a comprehensive framework. Would a genre approach to the conventions and norms of these sites, the inclusivity and exclusivity of their design add something of value? Trillo et. al (2010) propose semantics techniques to group the results provided by a traditional search engine into categories defined by the different meanings of the input keywords in another approach towards understanding the system. Intriguing parallels remain with the idea of textual analyses, particularly content analyses within communications studies.

Not everything in such research seems to have a 'micro' approach to users, and contexts of consumption, relations of power and so forth, which have historically been established as priorities

of empirical audience research, seem to disappear in some, if not all research. The system within which, users as a general category persists, find space in much research, note for instance Ilon, (2010) on e-learning and systems design, which is not really about user in that micro sense of the term. Kimmerle et al, (2010) look at the evolution of individual and collective knowledge with Wikis, Pearce (2010) looks at technology adoption by researchers and Barjak et. al, (2010) e-infrastructure adoption. All of these essays provide a perspective on a large network of users, and one misses perhaps the contextualized audience of audience reception studies. Peer production (Kreiss et. al, 2011), technology adoption and the pursuit of interpersonal goals in one-to-one interactions (Taylor et. al 2011) are all interesting strands within such an approach to users, but the contextualised user somehow seems absent.

Literacy and education studies bring a more text-reader centred approach towards theorising the new media user. Earlier in this thesis, I have spent some time discussing, for instance, the work of Gunther Kress, especially his work on genres in the age of new media, the birth of hybrid genres and the changing modalities in the shift from monomodal to visual. I have also noted how much within literacy research is born out of an ethnographic approach to those who read and write, especially within research with digital media. Mills (2010) notes it is 'incorrect to assume that today's adolescents are all "digital natives" and that engaging adolescents in multimodal textual practices must involve more than conforming the curriculum to their interests and practices—it should extend students' repertoire of skills and genres'. O'Brian and Scharber (2010) focus on generational differences in perceiving an abundance of modalities and form in contrasting ways, and show how these perceptions slow down the implementation and integration of many technologies that could change how students and teachers work with concepts and how they collaborate. Work with digital literacy often looks at questions of medium and mode, as outlined earlier in this thesis. Critical

perspectives on literacy, especially digital literacy and the problems with it, abound. Note what Chase and Laufenburg (2011) say – ‘Just as teachers were working to conclusively define *literacy*, *digital literacy* arrived on the scene and the discussion started again. In fact, the most solid of ground to be found in the debate surrounding digital literacy is the agreement that, whatever it is, it is important to the success of our students. Even then, not everyone is in agreement.’ It is certain then, that first, psychological, sociological and ethnographic approaches to learning within literacy studies already mirror and carry forward these very foci within media audience reception studies. In addition, work with new media textualities (Klastrup, 2001; Brueggers, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009; Kress, 2003) links closely with the focus on genres and texts within audience reception research.

Consider how diverse the arena is, within research with new media users. Introducing a collection of essays presented at a leading internet studies conference, Kendall and Haythornthwaite (2011) mention topics such as “gender and participation in online play spaces, effects of application interoperability on privacy, blogging as public discourse, comparisons of credibility of user-generated information and expert produced information in encyclopedias, the shaping of a specialty on the information society through research contributions, and the issue of internet non-participation”. Harvey (2011) uses gender theory to approach games, construction of play as masculine and the code of games, Lovheim (2011) studies blogs of women as ethical spaces using theories of the self and identity and Elias and Lemish (2010) also look at identity and the role of the internet in the lives of immigrant adolescents. Thornham and MacFarlane (2010) look at teens’ rejection of idea of digital native, divergence and difference, Blanchard et.al (2010) study trust among members of virtual communities using theories of trust and identity theories, Niknam (2010) looks at mobiles and youth culture in the Iranian context. Freelon (2011) looks at role of design in encouraging/discouraging civic

participation, Laer and Aelst (2010) look at public engagement with internet, and democratic possibilities with the internet remains the focus on much research (Malin, 2011; Theocharis, 2011).

In much of this work, there is a strong focus on contextual conditions and this is perhaps where the legacy from cultural studies within audience research makes its presence felt, simply by distinguishing such research within media and communications studies from pursuits of the internet user within other disciplines, indicated earlier. The many decades of empirical audience reception research are not referenced at all, however. Would Jenkins's work on fans (1992) or Radway's work with the readers of romance novels and their sense of self (1984) or Mary Ellen Brown's women resisting soaps through laughter (1994) provide insights of worth to work with women and blogs, or the construction of identity in a digital everyday life? Is there something of worth in the many decades of understanding how audiences respond to news and political debates that could aid our understanding of civic participation in the age of the internet? There is, perhaps, a history of empirical research longer than what is referenced in empirical research with new media users?

I have only indicated a few areas within user research in recent times, where the empirical legacy of audience reception studies could be of use. More generally, in this thesis I have argued that concepts from audience reception remain instructive. In doing this, I do not claim that every aspect and angle of user studies would benefit from taking a leaf out of audience research but rather that there are sufficient ways in which the two can meet.

In this thesis, I analysed interviews with children using SNSs, but really, taking off from the mapping of contemporary scholarly conversation (at best indicative), I maintained that we could be hopeful of a collective and interdisciplinary interest in audiences transforming, but unanswered questions

remain. It seems one still does not have a sophisticated understanding of genre in the age of new media, and empirical accounts of literacies as interpretative practices are still scarce. What of future research? Terrains remain uncertain, in terms of new forms and genres, we know not what to anticipate, blurring and convergence is bound to fast render our generic repertoires dated, if not useless; conceptually, as I have traced here, a historically inflected perspective works because there are resources from mass-mediated environments which may be useful, but then again, one does not know if they will indeed be able to accommodate hybridity, change and flux; methodologically, people are experimenting – new, creative, unconventional methods to grapple with the diverse nature of use and interpretation are being fashioned out of existing methods, or entirely new ones are being suggested, although doubts still remain around their utility.

What I hope to have achieved

In what follows, I conclude this thesis with a statement of what I anticipate to be some of the major achievements of this study and indicate some potential ways forward. In this thesis, I have imported a largely print-derived conceptual repertoire into the analysis of interviews with users of an interactive genre. This in itself, is, as I see it, an important task to have been undertaken at the intellectual moment our field seems to be going through. Our interests in democracy, participation, engagement, gender, class, ethnicity, nation, identity, health, sports show that this all is mediated and everyday life is digital for many. Responding to an uncertainty about the conceptual repertoire of reception studies in the age of the internet could have been done in many ways and in writing this thesis, my central task has been to ask in what ways the theoretical repertoire of audience reception analysis transfers from mass-mediated communicative conditions to interactive ones. Some key points about the achievement of my attempts/conclusions are as follows -

- First, the key implication for audience researchers is that it is no longer feasible to speak of “traditional audience research”. Media environments are converging and viewing is connected. Contemporary projects that look at audiences by medium, platform or genre cannot choose to ignore this. When I say ‘traditional audience research’ I refer to audience research that has often, till now, clustered by genre. Film audiences now, for instance, are also often content-producing audiences, users of multi-player online games where relationships with characters, narratives and plots spill out of the generic boundary that the audience researcher is primarily interested in. This is something that different scholars approach differently – some choose to think of the entire ‘media repertoires’ of audiences, instead of audiences by specific media forms (see Hasebrink and Popp, 2006) and some feel a necessity of tailoring new methods (see for instance, Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2007). The rising contemporary focus on mediatisation is also another way in which this focus shift is visible, from specific genres to entire media environments.
- A second key implication for audience researchers is that this does not mean that the insights of reception studies accumulated over these many decades are now dated. The empirical priorities emergent from many decades of audience research continue to be instructive as does the range of conceptual tools mobilised by audience researchers continue to be instructive and worthy of retention.
- Third, usefully for both audience and user researchers, in developing the methodological tool of a ‘theory-led, deductively oriented interview’ (see Hänska and Das, 2010; 2011), methodologically I have tried to demonstrate how a certain loyalty towards conceptual analysis needs to be retained in the face of rich and growing bodies of empirical evidence. I had stated previously that the theory-led qualitative interview begins from a focus on theories and concepts and is ‘an apt space in which conceptual concerns meet the social

world and where the interview guide, through first, second and third order questions, provides a bridge between theory and empirical.’ This gives us the advantage of using the interview not only to get data but to establish an ‘interpretative bridge’ between our larger questions and our methods of assembling and interpreting evidence.’ In so doing in this thesis, I have established that audience ‘reception’ research can potentially develop a method where even tried and tested methods let us reach at some conceptualisation of the text through the eyes of the reader. This stance has its problems and the design of this project did not mean to understate the significance of textual conventions in shaping, and even affording, a range of interpretations.

- Fourth, I have identified that it is not ‘activity’ and proofs thereof which matter, for audience reception studies, nor can all activity be interpreted as resistance. I have not sought to establish activity, or interpretations as deviant from what is afforded. The task was largely to seek for interpretative divergence, which, when demographically patterned, as Schröder et al (2003) called for, moved on to carrying the repertoire (or perhaps, *a* repertoire) around interpretation, into the dynamics of use.
- Fifth, I have brought together a range of contemporary attempts in our field at the moment around my core questions, that bring into relief an on-going conversation around transforming audiences. This I made visible not only across the trajectories of scholarly careers but also in the changing content and priorities of journal issues, graduate courses and trans-Continental research projects.

I have argued for the revisiting and revision of a rather specific set of concepts, where the attempt really has been two-sided. First, I wished to see if this repertoire could help shape the design of a project on users interfacing with an online genre, and second, I sought to ask if this repertoire could,

fruitfully, be extended. In this attempt I introduced some version of a 'test' of core concepts which could prove to be useful to those using these concepts for future research.

In this context I outline specifically my achievements in suggesting revisions and extensions to the concept of 'horizon of expectations'. . The key retention I propose is to look at the horizon of expectations as a great way in which to make sense of the cultural resources and competencies that resource engagement with the text. What are the contexts in which a text is evaluated? This is crucially a question that the concept of the horizon of expectations helps us respond to. However, in an extension from the original Jauss-ian notion of literary-aesthetic-historical contexts of a text, I propose that the concept needs to be looked at also from the audience's point of view i.e. what are other factors, outside of the literary-historical that shape audience expectations and anticipations? This extended concept allows us to look at what goes behind developing analytical, evaluative and critical competencies with the media - something directly relevant for contemporary research with media literacies. In other words, while Jauss originally used the term to outline the literary contexts within which a text is received, I extend it to propose that we include in any individual's or group's horizon of expectations the entire set of socio-cultural and contextual factors (including the contemporary literary-historical ones Jauss speaks about) with which they approach a given text or their media environments.

I elaborate on some of these achievements in what follows. The interdisciplinary conceptual framework developed around relationships of mutuality between texts and readers in this thesis has outlined that reception research is intrinsically connected to many decade old pursuits (for instance philosophical hermeneutics) as well as contemporary conversations on science and technology and indeed even policy relevant research with media use and literacies. The conceptual repertoire I

indicated was diverse, and could not, in its entirety, be applied in this thesis. My methodological achievements as indicated earlier (see Hänska and Das, 2011) have been to clearly articulate the role of two distinctive moments in the research process – that of designing the interview guide and that of developing the coding framework. This marked key linkages between the conceptual and empirical, keeping both in the same frame.

This thesis shows, like much on-going research in the field that use, like audience reception, is not an uncomplicated agglomeration of a set of skills developed in response to the structure and design of web interfaces, although indeed, both of these are important, and as I pointed out the text gains meaning in a variety of contexts. Youthful users lead varied lives where some have more resources than others, some have restraints which they manage to turn into resources of sorts and others have ambitions which they sometimes cannot pursue. This contributes towards refuting the ‘digital natives’ argument precisely to show that although the pursuit of demographic patterning (Schröder et al, 2003a) of interpretation is difficult, contextual locations of use and bound to throw up crucial differences that often group by demographic categories.

My conclusions show that some of the very interesting differences are to do with the notion of authorship and authorial power – an important point to note in the middle of celebratory discourses about user-generated content. The implications for research on trust in the media and media literacy as abilities to analyse, interpret and evaluate, are important (Das and Pavlickova, in prep).

This thesis has shown, perhaps yet again, that not all difference and diversity is necessarily significant or worth pursuing, but that many instances of difference do matter. Significantly for discussions in media literacy where much of the responsibility is placed on people instead of the media itself, my

conclusions affirm that textual experiences, when shaped by the contextual location of interpreters, are simultaneously shaped by the design of the text itself. That conclusion – of keeping an eye on the design, form, shape and content of the media – is a crucial task for both theoreticians and practitioners.

Finally, this thesis has performed a somewhat rare task in reception studies, at least in empirical reception studies – that of conducting a conceptual analysis. My proposed retentions of some of these key concepts and my proposed extensions when necessary, make these concepts useful tools with which to conduct audience/user analysis. In total, these conceptual, empirical and methodological achievements, I think, are significant for both audience and user researchers.

Four directions for the future seem apparent. And these four could very easily and usefully be those four concepts that Livingstone (2004, 2008) uses to tie together the audiences agenda with the literacies agenda, namely, the role of the text, of interpretation, of contexts and the question of divergence. Research with the text, taking off from Kress's (2003) and also Bruns's work (2006), invites multiple perspectives. As Kress's research shows us, textual analysis, with its rich semiotic repertoire, meets affordances from the resources offered by linguistics and social semiotics. Discourse and representation, form and content, must continue to receive empirical attention, or else one shall never quite be able to grasp the genres of new media. But following from Bruns – it is perhaps via an interdisciplinary collaboration of economics, network analysis, critical studies of online environments that we shall understand that important matter of the text - 'how interpretation is far from unconstrained' (Livingstone, 2008a, p. 53). Interpretation, as we have seen here, is being re-conceptualized via literacies. One task, perhaps, is to look at interpretation not as a skill, but as a practice. All practices have histories. Practices are design-mediated, hence my focus on interpretative

work for one genre in this project. The moment one shifts the focus from the technology over to the affordances and textual organization it presents, and from technical skills of learning what to click over to the socially situated, collaboratively negotiated divergent practices of interpreting these texts, one has stalled the worry of technological determinism. Jenkins (2006) and Wilson (2009) have shown this in their work: technologies can be interpreted meaningfully only in context, the fan communities, bloggers, gamers, collaborators who anticipate, shed tears over and greet a text with endless enthusiasm are not mindless consumers of trash. The fourth on Livingstone's list was divergence. Why is it necessary to investigate how readings are playful, how people diverge in their sense making? One instance from research speaks of supposed 'digital natives'. Age cohorts, convenient as they are, do no justice to the question of difference. It is necessary therefore to investigate divergence and difference, and perhaps also consensus in making sense of digital everyday lives, new genres and new texts. In this thesis, interpretation was always active, exciting, ludic and divergent. Sometimes, interpretations could also reach large-scale peer consensus, largely, if not solely, guided by the dominant 'reading path', not resistant, prone to textual manipulations in a social network where adverts merge into 'friend feeds', or are too similar across people to catch the researcher's eye. Seemingly simple perhaps, but elusive nonetheless and hence worth pursuing, a framework that focuses on interpretative engagement, divergent and convergent, keeping an eye on the provisions of the media itself, rooted firmly in societal and cultural contexts, will perhaps do justice as a research agenda.

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Appendices

Participant profile by age, gender, SES and ethnicity and notes on participants

This uses the 3 class version of the UK National Statistics SES categorisation based on what children said about their parents' occupations. Here, 1 stands for managerial and professional occupations, 2 for intermediate occupations and 3 for routine and manual occupations. W stands for White and NW for Non-white.

Age group	Pseudonym	Gender	SES	Ethnicity	Notes
Pre-teens (11-12 yrs) Years – 7/8	Arthur	M	1	W	Arthur goes to an academically selective, private boys' school in London. He plays rugby and the clarinet. His mum does not work and his dad 'does renewable energy' He is very quiet and not very involved with the internet although he is curious about many things.
	Cole	M	1	W	Cole goes to the same school as Arthur. He is chatty and lively. He is a drummer and cricketer. Cole's dad works in the school and his mum works at BT. He travels each day from Kent to London and finds little time to go online.
	Evan	M	2	W	Evan likes skate-boarding and playing X box. He lives with his mother and step-father and his little brother who goes to a different state school than Evan.
	Agit	M	2	NW	Agit seems especially fond of warfare games and knows a good deal about Mafia Wars and Vampire Wars and similar games on Facebook. He and Evan both go to the same state school that Alice goes to. He has a big family.
	Thomas	M	2	W	Thomas goes to a state school and is a very creative child. He likes building things with Lego, painting, playing football and cooking! He comes from a close knit family and most of his Facebook contacts are cousins, distant family and aunts with whom he likes keeping in touch. He has to share a computer with his family and while he finds that annoying,

					he agrees that otherwise ‘it costs too much money’.
	Ryan	M	3	W	Ryan wants to be a lawyer or a boxer when he grows up. He goes to a state school. His mother is a cleaner and his dad stays at home. He lives with his parents, a sister who is 13, a brother of six and another sister who is 17 and lives with their grandmother. He feels his family can protect him if online dangers hit him suddenly and has great confidence in his uncle who is ‘very big’.
	Alan	M	2	W	Alan is in the same year group as Sophia and is very chatty. His mum works part-time as an accountant and his dad ‘decorates stuff’.
	Shayaa na	F	2	NW	Shayaana goes to a state school and has a shared use of computers. She tells me that she has a very rich ethnic background with ‘Ghana, Indian, American, Chinese, Polish, Spanish, black, white – all these countries in me’
	Abby	F	2	W	Abby is in the same year group as Shayaana and is very impressed by the LSE. She shares computers with her siblings. Her mum stays at home and her dad works with accounts.
	Julia	F	2	W	Julia is a quiet child with an interesting Facebook practice of engaging just with her aunt with whom she regularly chats for at least half an hour each day. She goes to the same school as Thomas and is in the same year group.
	Alice	F	3	W	Alice lives with disabled mother and a step father. She takes the bus to an inner city state school each day. She has recently been given a new computer by the school and lacks friends. She seems a sad little girl who wants to expand her social circle and is sometimes tired of having to look after her mother. She has a brother who lives with her father, but who she says is a ‘bad boy’ who has dropped out of school. She is a caring grand-daughter who has introduced her grandfather to Facebook and MSN.
	Belinda	F	3	W	Belinda is being raised by a single mother who ‘helps take old people to work’. She is not in touch with her Dad. She is an exceptionally quiet child. She attends the same school as Ryan and is in the same year group. While she does not have too many gadgets, unlike her friend Ryan, she calls herself a shopaholic.
	Sophia	F	3	W	Sophia goes to a state school and is a football player. Her dad works part

					time as a delivery man who delivers food and salad to Manchester. She says 'he gets lots of money for it though. It's a good job, he gets lots for it, and my mum goes to the parish church and she looks after kids at our house.'
Early teens (13-14 yrs) Years: 8/9	John	M	2	W	John lives with three brothers, his stepdad, mum and one little sister. His mum stays at home and his step-dad works at the Royal Mail. He goes to an inner city state school and is in the same year group as Alison.
	Fritz	M	1	W	Fritz is Norwegian and studies at an American school in London. Fritz's mum is a marketing manager for Unilever and his dad stays at home because he is blind. His mum's job moved which explains why they moved as well.
	Niels	M	1	W	Neils is German and is in the same school and year group as Fritz. He played soccer for Junior Varsity and is now playing for Junior Varsity Rugby. He has three older siblings. His mother works in the health sector he says.
	Ashley	F	1	W	Ashley is a quiet child who goes to a private girls school. She likes reading and painting. Her parents are both psychologists and she seems to have a good rapport with them as far as her internet use is concerned. She knows she can 'tell them anything that happens'.
	Jeremy	M	1	W	Jeremy and Lee go to an academically selective private boys school. Jeremy likes rugby, tennis and technology. His mum is a secretary at a leading bank and his father a designer.
	Lee	M	1	W	Lee's family is in Hong Kong where his father is a top police official. He is very focused on academic work and wants to be a skin doctor because it will get him lots of money. He has been sent to be a boarder at a private boys school in the UK.
	Ryan	M	1	W	Ryan is half British and half Algerian. He goes to an American school in London. Ryan has two younger brothers. His mother is a teacher in the same school where he studies. He lives with his parents.
	Fontaine	M	1	W	Fontaine has lived in Norway for ten years, is half American and half French and goes to the same school as Ryan. Fontaine has two older sisters who have graduated university. He lives with his parents.
	Diana	F	1	W	Diana is Ashley's and Rishona's friend and goes to the same private girls school. She lives with her mother and step father both of whom are

					senior academics in a leading London university. She is creative, wants to be an orator, a writer and a historian when she grows up and reaches out to her friends with care and affection.
	Josephine	F	1	W	Josephine is from New York and studies in an American system school in London. Her mother stays at home and her father is a banker with a leading Scottish bank. She enjoys ballet and basketball.
	Catherine	F	1	W	Catherine is British but has lived in America and studies in the same school as Josephine. Her mother is the school librarian and her dad works at Microsoft.
	Rishona	F	1	W	Rishona goes to a private girls school and comes from a long line of people who have been to Oxbridge. She wants to study drama and literature and is keen to go to Oxford. She is the youngest of her siblings and often gets bullied. But she seems lively and has a great sense of humour and sustains a very exciting interview.
	Alison	F	1	NW	Alison seems disturbed with something. She seems to detest Facebook and those who do rude or nasty things on there although she will not specify details. She lives with her mum (teacher), dad (a vet) and three brothers. She seems irritable and depressed and at times is rude when asked questions during the interview.
	Shelly	F	2	W	Shelly has the latest gadgets, calls herself a shopaholic and is inseparable from her phone. Her father she says splurges on her when he can and gives her money to buy new clothes. She seems to have a life that is sharp contrast to Janet's who is in the same year group. Both Shelly and Janet go to an inner city state school.
	Janet	F	3	NW	Janet shares a computer with members of her family and would want cool new gadgets but cannot afford them. It's always 'a race to get to the computer'. Her mum is occasionally employed and is a single parent. Her sister is at school, her older sister is in school, her oldest sister is in college, and her brother has just started work.
	Tiffany	F	2	W	Tiffany is a quiet girl in the same year group as Asif. Her mother is a teaching assistant and her dad 'has a job at the Parliament'. She seems rather critical of her classmate Asif's Facebook practices and does not like putting up her photos online.
	Asif	M	3	NW	Asif goes to an inner city state school and comes from a Pakistani

					immigrant family. He wants to own a fried chicken shop someday. His dad has a health problem that prevents him from working and his mother is studying at university. He lives with his siblings, parents and grandmother. He is addicted he says to the Xbox and Facebook.
Mid teens (15-16 yrs) Years: 10/11	Martin	M	1	W	Martin enjoys basketball, squash and tennis and goes to an academically selective private boys' school. Martin's parents have busy careers he says and his Dad always gets home very late.
	Dean	M	1	W	Dean enjoys rugby and plays the piano, flute and guitar. He goes to the same private boys' school as Martin. Both Dean's parents are teachers.
	Simon	M	2	W	Simon is a very quiet boy and it is a challenge to get him to speak. He was interviewed with Anne and let her do most of the talking even when he was prompted by me to speak. He goes to a state school and thinks social network sites should be banned from children's institutions.
	Bahri	M	2	NW	Bahri likes performance and theatre. He comes from a large diasporic Asian family and one of his parents is employed. He goes to an inner city state school.
	Adil	M	2	NW	Adil goes to a state school and lives with his parents and a sister. His dad has a business where his sister works and his mum stays at home. He seems to have access to a range of gadgets and goes online as we talk on his iPhone. He has his own TV and computer at home, he says. He is a football fan and all his Facebook applications are to do with football clubs.
	Sebastian	M	3	W	Sebastian does not have his own computer or access to the internet and seems a laid back and easy going person. He lets Cathy play games for him online as we speak. His parents are occasionally employed.
	Chip	M	3	NW	Chip is very interested in BBC or British Born Cypriots who he follows closely on Facebook. He does not use social network sites too regularly and has no access when he is staying with his father. His parents are occasionally employed.
	Jay	M	3	W	Jay enjoys football and comes from a very large family with many siblings. He has to share his computer for access. His parents are occasionally employed. He goes to the same state school as Sania.
	Bob	M	3	W	Bob goes to the same state school as Kelly. His dad does not do much and he his mum works at Sainsbury's. he enjoys playing football and does

					not have much access to computers and the internet but goes online on Facebook occasionally.
	Delia	F	3	W	Delia works hard on all her weekends to finance her personal cost and is training to be a beautician. Her mother works as a nanny part time and her brother is in Afghanistan. She uses social network sites to plan outings if she is not working and to support her brother at war.
	Anne	F	2	W	Anne goes to the same state school as Simon. She is a serious and quiet girl. She looks down slightly at people who play too many games online.
	Shaheen	F	3	NW	Shaheen goes to the same state school as Bahri. She has four siblings, has to share a computer between them, and does baby-sitting to finance some of her own costs.
	Cathy	F	3	W	Cathy is a fun-loving and chatty girl who has a huge circle of friends on Facebook. She does not have internet access at home for financial reasons but she still manages to go online often from friends' computers. Her parents 'don't do much' she says.
	Sania	F	3	NW	Sania comes from a large diasporic family which has placed many restrictions on her social activities including ones she could do at school – such as singing or dancing. She keeps her facebook carefully guarded from her parents. She is a quiet girl and yet seems assertive. Her parents are occasionally employed
	Kelly	F	2	W	Kelly lives with her mother and has been stalked by her father which no longer seems to upset her. She is a very jovial and chatty girl and seems disdainful of those who cannot protect themselves online. Her mother works and covers some of her phone costs for which she is grateful. She has discovered much of her mum's real family through Facebook (her mother was adopted).
Older teens (17-18 yrs) Years: Sixth form	John	M	1	W	John is a very serious and focused person who wants 'to be a solicitor, but the way things are with the economy, it might... I might end up doing something else'. He is very conscious of the way Facebook mines data and is careful of what he puts online. He wants a training contract straight after studies so that he does not have to take a gap year.
	Neal	M	1	W	Neal enjoys studying computers and has a keen interest in photoshopping. He enjoys Maths, economics, physics and computer science. He and Samuel both go to a private boys school. Both his parents

					are in full time work and his father is lawyer.
	Samuel	M	1	W	Samuel has a flair for languages and wants to pursue either Economics or French. He likes hands on experience with computers and built himself his own assembled computer. His mother is a businesswoman and his father a teacher.
	Mark	M	1	W	Mark is an articulate and very computer savvy person. He enjoys athletics, traveling and football. His parents both work and he is focused on a career as a lawyer or an economist.
	Diana	F	1	W	Diana is a creative girl who tells me she used to touch type as a kid and has grown up with a range of gadgets around her. Her mother has a job that involves computers and has always worked on computers. She plays around with fonts, wallpapers, graphics and is clearly very artistic.
	Jenny	F	1	W	Jenny is Danish but goes to an American system school and is in the same year group as Jean. She is a sporty girl and plays volleyball, basketball and runs track. She was applying to study management at five universities when we spoke, She wants to help her parents with the nursery they run and manage.
	Jean	F	1	W	Jean goes to an American system school. She plays the piano at a very high grade but says 'I suck because I am a perfectionist'. She wants to study music at university. Her mother is Korean and she participates in both British and Korean cultural activities.
	Leanne	F	2	W	Leanne is a creative girl who likes advertising, illustration, moving image, and design for print. She uses a range of social network sites, especially ones which have people from her Asian heritage, to share her art work. She wishes to pursue art.
	Kristy	F	3	NW	Kristy has two older siblings. Her father is unemployed and her mother is a student. She does not have access to her own computer and shares one with her siblings where her 'sister can go on it anytime, because she has to do her work, but for me, it just comes when I do my work, then I can use it.'
	Ayanna	F	3	NW	Ayanna is a very religious girl who enjoys a range of activities with her church group. Her parents are occasionally employed. She seems eager to tell me about 'weird' things that happen on Facebook but hesitates often and decides against it.

	Olisha	F	3	NW	Olisha spends half the week with her mum and the rest with her dad. She is a quiet girl who faces a number of restrictions from home on her social life. Her mother does not work and they depend for money on a cousin who lives with them and earns, and who gets a say in Olisha's social life.
	Munir	F	3	NW	Munir is in the same year group in an inner city state school, as Olisha and spends the entire interview period playing the Crazy Taxi game on Facebook. He hardly speaks. One of his parents is unemployed and the other occasionally employed.
	Pat	M	2	W	Pat is a confident, chatty and articulate young person who wants to do Oriental studies after a trip to the Middle east inspired him. He speaks Spanish, Arabic and Italian and wants a career in languages. His parents live and work in the countryside.
	Rhea	F	2	NW	Rhea is a quiet girl who seems very scared of online dangers. She enjoys reaching out to friends, seems set for a degree in psychology at university and comes from a large Asian diasporic family in London. She has some social restrictions placed on her by her family but does not seem to mind.
	Milly	F	2	NW	Milly is a very creative girl and her MySpace profile page shows it. She is working part time to fund her own costs and wants to design and graphics in university. She is particularly striking in the metaphors she uses to express her thoughts about Facebook.

